

**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

# OF THEIR LIVES IN THE RUINS OF THEIR CITIES

**DAN ABNETT**



A SHORT STORY FROM THE SABBAT WORLDS ANTHOLOGY

**A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL**

**OF THEIR LIVES IN THE  
RUINS OF THEIR CITIES**

*Dan Abnett*



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IT IS THE 41ST MILLENNIUM. FOR MORE THAN A HUNDRED CENTURIES THE EMPEROR HAS SAT IMMOBILE ON THE GOLDEN THRONE OF EARTH. HE IS THE MASTER OF MANKIND BY THE WILL OF THE GODS, AND MASTER OF A MILLION WORLDS BY THE MIGHT OF HIS INEXHAUSTIBLE ARMIES. HE IS A ROTTING CARCASS WRITHING INVISIBLY WITH POWER FROM THE DARK AGE OF TECHNOLOGY. HE IS THE CARRION LORD OF THE IMPERIUM FOR WHOM A THOUSAND SOULS ARE SACRIFICED EVERY DAY, SO THAT HE MAY NEVER TRULY DIE.

YET EVEN IN HIS DEATHLESS STATE, THE EMPEROR CONTINUES HIS ETERNAL VIGILANCE. MIGHTY BATTLEFLEETS CROSS THE DAEMON-INFESTED MIASMA OF THE WARP, THE ONLY ROUTE BETWEEN DISTANT STARS, THEIR WAY LIT BY THE ASTRONOMICAN, THE PSYCHIC MANIFESTATION OF THE EMPEROR'S WILL. VAST ARMIES GIVE BATTLE IN HIS NAME ON UNCOUNTED WORLDS. GREATEST AMONGST HIS SOLDIERS ARE THE ADEPTUS ASTARTES, THE SPACE MARINES, BIO-ENGINEERED SUPER-WARRIORS. THEIR COMRADES IN ARMS ARE LEGION: THE IMPERIAL GUARD AND COUNTLESS PLANETARY DEFENCE FORCES, THE EVER-VIGILANT INQUISITION AND THE TECH-PRIESTS OF THE ADEPTUS MECHANICUS TO NAME ONLY A FEW. BUT FOR ALL THEIR MULTITUDES, THEY ARE BARELY ENOUGH TO HOLD OFF THE EVER-PRESENT THREAT FROM ALIENS, HERETICS, MUTANTS - AND WORSE.

TO BE A MAN IN SUCH TIMES IS TO BE ONE AMONGST UNTOLD BILLIONS. IT IS TO LIVE IN THE CRUELLEST AND MOST BLOODY REGIME IMAGINABLE. THESE ARE THE TALES OF THOSE TIMES. FORGET THE POWER OF TECHNOLOGY AND SCIENCE, FOR SO MUCH HAS BEEN FORGOTTEN, NEVER TO BE RE-LEARNED. FORGET THE PROMISE OF PROGRESS AND UNDERSTANDING, FOR IN THE GRIM DARK FUTURE THERE IS ONLY WAR. THERE IS NO PEACE AMONGST THE STARS, ONLY AN ETERNITY OF CARNAGE AND SLAUGHTER, AND THE LAUGHTER OF THIRSTING GODS.

## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

A new Gaunt story from me, a novella, actually.

I don't want to say too much about it, because almost anything I mention will be a spoiler. All I will say is that writing this story was exactly what I needed to get me back on the horse after my Adventures in Epilepsy. It was great to engage, up close and personal, with characters who were old friends.

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IT FEELS LIKE the afterlife, and none of them are entirely convinced that it isn't. They have pitched up in a cold and rain-lashed stretch of lowland country, on the morning after somebody else's triumph, with a bunch of half-arsed orders, a dislocating sense that the war is elsewhere and carrying on without them, and very little unit cohesion. They have a couple of actions under their belts, just enough to lift their chins, but nothing like enough to bind them together or take the deeper pain away and, besides, other men have collected the medals. They're out in the middle of nowhere, marching further and further away from anything that matters anymore, because nothing matters anymore.

They are just barely the Tanith First and Only. They are not Gaunt's Ghosts. They are never going to be Gaunt's Ghosts.



SILENT LIGHTNING STROBES in the distance. His back turned towards it and the rain, the young Tanith infantryman watches Ibram Gaunt at work from the entrance of the war tent. The colonel-commissar is seated at the far end of a long table around which, an hour earlier, two dozen Guard officers and adjutants were gathered for a briefing. Now Gaunt is alone.

The infantryman has been allowed to stand at ease, but he is on call.

He has been selected to act as runner for the day. It's his job to attend the commander, to pick up any notes or message satchels at a moment's notice, and deliver them as per orders. Foot couriers are necessary because the vox is down. It's been down a lot, this past week. It'd been patchy and unreliable around Voltis City. Out in the lowlands, it's useless, like audio soup. You can hear

voices, now and then. Someone said maybe the distant, soundless lightning is to blame.

Munitorum-issue chem lamps, those tin-plate models that unscrew and then snap out for ignition, have been strung along the roof line, and there is a decent rechargeable glow-globe on the table beside Gaunt's elbow. The lamps along the roof line are swaying and rocking in the wind that's finding its way into the long tent. The lamps add a golden warmth to the tent's shadowy interior, a marked contrast to the raw, wet blow driving up the valley outside. There is rain in the air, sticky clay underfoot, a whitewashed sky overhead, and a line of dirty hills in the middle distance that look like a lip of rock that someone has scraped their boots against. Somewhere beyond the hills, the corpse of a city lies in a shallow grave.

Gaunt is studying reports that have been printed out on paper flimsies. He has weighed them down on the surface of the folding table with cartons of bolter rounds so they won't blow away. The wind is really getting in under the tent's skirt. He's writing careful notes with a stylus. The infantryman can only imagine the importance of those jottings. Tactical formulations, perhaps? Attack orders?

Gaunt is not well liked, but the infantryman finds him interesting. Watching him work at least takes the infantryman's mind off the fact that he's standing in the mouth of a tent with his arse out in the rain.

No indeed, Colonel-Commissar Ibram Gaunt is not well liked. A reputation for genocide will do that to a man's character. He is intriguing, though. For a career soldier, he seems surprisingly reflective, a man of thought not action. There is a promise of wisdom in his narrow features. The infantryman wonders if this was a mistake of ethnicity, a misreading brought about by cultural differences. Gaunt and the infantryman were born on opposite sides of the sector.

The infantryman finds it amusing to imagine Gaunt grown very elderly. Then he might look, the infantryman thinks, like one of those wizened old savants, the kind that know everything about fething everything.

However, the infantryman also has good reason to predict that Gaunt will never live long enough to grow old. Gaunt's profession mitigates against it, as does the cosmos he has been born into, and the specific nature of his situation.

If the Archenemy of Mankind does not kill Ibram Gaunt, the infantryman thinks, then Gaunt's own men will do the job.



#### A BETTER TENT.

Gaunt writes the words at the top of his list. He knows he'll have to look up the correct Munitorum code number, though he thinks it's 1NXIGlxA. Sym will know and—

Sym would have known, but Sym is dead. Gaunt exhales. He really has to train himself to stop doing that. Sym had been his adjutant and Gaunt had come to rely on him; it still seems perfectly normal to turn and expect to find Sym there, waiting, ready and resourceful. Sym had known how to procure a dress coat in the middle of the night, or a pot of collar starch, or a bottle of decent amasec, or a copy of the embarkation transcripts before they were published. He'd have known the Munitorum serial code for a tent/temperate winter. The structure Gaunt is sitting in is not a tent/temperate winter. It's an old tropical shelter left over from another theatre. It's waxed against rain, but there are canvas vents low down along the base hem designed to keep air circulating on balmy, humid days. This particular part of Voltemand seldom sees balmy humid days. The east wind, its cheeks full of rain, is pushing the vents open and invading the tent like a polar gale.

Under A better tent he writes: A portable heater.

He hardly cares for his own comfort, but he'd noted the officers and their junior aides around the table that morning, backs hunched, moods foul, teeth gritted against the cold, every single one of them in a hurry to get the meeting over so they could head back to their billets and their own camp stoves.

Men who are uncomfortable and in a hurry do not make good decisions. They rush things. They are not thorough. They often make general noises of consent just to get briefings over with, and that morning they'd all done it: the Tanith officers, the Ketzok tankers, the Litus B.R.U., all of them.

Gaunt knows it's all payback, though. The whole situation is payback. He is being punished for making that Blueblood general look like an idiot, even though Gaunt'd had the moral high ground. He had been avenging Tanith blood, because there isn't enough of that left for anyone to go around wasting it.

He thinks about the letter in his pocket, and then lets the thought go again.

When he'd been assigned to the Tanith, Gaunt had relished the prospect as it

was presented on paper: a first founding from a small, agrarian world that was impeccable in its upkeep of tithes and devotions. Tanith had no real black marks in the Administratum's eyes, and no longstanding martial traditions to get tangled up in. There had been the opportunity to build something worthwhile, three regiments of light infantry, to begin with, though Gaunt's plans had been significantly more ambitious than that: a major infantry force, fast and mobile, well-drilled and disciplined. The Munitorum's recruitment agents reported that the Tanith seemed to have a natural knack for tracking and covert work, and Gaunt had hoped to add that speciality to the regiment's portfolio. From the moment he'd reviewed the Tanith dossier, Gaunt had begun to see the sense of Slaydo's deathbed bequest to him.

The plans and dreams have come apart, though. The Archenemy, still stinging from Balhaut, burned worlds in the name of vengeance, and one of those worlds was Tanith. Gaunt got out with his life, just barely, and with him he'd dragged a few of the mustered Tanith men, enough for one regiment. Not enough men to ever be anything more than a minor infantry support force, to die as trench fodder in some Throne-forgotten ocean of mud, but just enough men to hate his living guts for the rest of forever for not letting them die with their planet.

Ibram Gaunt has been trained as a political officer, and he is a very good one, though the promotion Slaydo gave him was designed to spare him from the slow death of a political career. His political talents, however, can usually find a positive expression for even the worst scenarios.

In the cold lowlands of Voltemand, an upbeat interpretation is stubbornly eluding him.

He has stepped away from a glittering career with the Hyrkans, cut his political ties with all the men of status and influence who could assist him or advance him, and ended up in a low-value theatre on a third-tier warfront, in command of a salvaged, broken regiment of unmotivated men who hate him. There is still the letter in his pocket, of course.

He looks down at his list, and writes:

Spin this shit into gold, or get yourself a transfer to somewhere with a desk and a driver.

He looks at this for a minute, and then scratches it out. He puts the stylus down.

"Trooper," he calls to the infantryman in the mouth of the tent. He knows the young man's name is Caffran. He is generally good with names, and he makes an effort to learn them quickly, but he is also sparing when it comes to using

them. Show a common lasman you know his name too early, and it'll seem like you're trying far too hard to be his new best friend, especially if you just let his home and family burn.

It'll seem like you're weak.

The infantryman snaps to attention sharply.

"Step inside," Gaunt calls, beckoning with two hooked fingers. "Is it still raining?"

"Sir," says Caffran non-committally as he approaches the table. "I want you to locate Corbec for me. I think he's touring the west picket."

"Sir."

"You've got that?"

"Find Colonel Corbec, sir."

Gaunt nods. He picks up his stylus and folds one of the flimsies in half, ready to write on the back of it. "Tell him to ready up three squads and meet me by the north post in thirty minutes. You need me to write that down for you?"

"No, sir."

"Three squads, north post, thirty minutes," says Gaunt. He writes it down anyway, and then embosses it with his biometric signet ring to transfer his authority code. He hands the note to the trooper. "Thirty minutes," he repeats, "lime for me to get some breakfast. Is the mess tent still cooking?"

"Sir," Caffran replies, this time flavouring it with a tiny, sullen shrug.

Gaunt looks him in the eye for a moment. Caffran manages to return about a second of insolent resentment, and then looks away into space over Gaunt's shoulder.

"What was her name?" Gaunt asks.

"What?"

"I took something from every single Tanith man," says Gaunt, pushing back his chair and standing up. "Apart from the obvious, of course. I was wondering what I'd taken from you in particular. What was her name?"

"How do you—"

"A man as young as you, it's bound to be a girl. And that tattoo indicates a family betrothal."

"You know about Tanith marks?" Caffran can't hide his surprise.

"I studied up, trooper. I wanted to know what sort of men my reputation was going to depend upon."

There is a pause. Rain beats against the outer skin of the tent like drumming fingertips.

“Laria,” Caffran says quietly. “Her name was Laria.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” says Gaunt.

Caffran looks at him again. He sneers slightly. “Aren’t you going to tell me it will be all right? Aren’t you going to assure me that I’ll find another girl somewhere?”

“If it makes you feel better,” says Gaunt. He sighs and turns back to look at Caffran. “It’s unlikely, but I’ll say it if it makes you feel better.” Gaunt puts on a fake, jaunty smile. “Somewhere, somehow, in one of the war-zones we march into, you’ll find the girl you’re supposed to be with, and you’ll live happily ever after. There. Better?”

Caffran’s mouth tightens and he mutters something under his breath.

“If you’re going to call me a bastard, do it out loud,” says Gaunt. “I don’t know why you’re so pissed off. You were walking out on this Laria anyway.”

“We were betrothed!”

“You’d signed up for the Imperial Guard, trooper. First Founding. You were never going to see Tanith again. I don’t know why you had the nerve to get hitched to the poor cow in the first place.”

“Of course I was coming back to her—”

“You sign up, you leave. Warp transfers, long rotations, tours along the rim. You never go back. You never go home, not once the Guard has you. Years go by, decades. You forget where you came from in the end.”

“But the recruiting officer said—”

“He lied to you, trooper. Do you think any bastard would sign up if the recruiters told the truth?”

Caffran sags. “He lied?”

“Yes. But I won’t. That’s the one thing you can count on with me. Now go and get Corbec.”

Caffran snaps off a poor salute, turns and heads out of the tent.

Gaunt sits down again. He begins to collect up the flimsies, and packs away the bolter shell cartons holding them down. He thinks about the letter in his pocket again.

On his list, he writes:

Appoint a new adjutant.

Under that, he writes:

Find a new adjutant.

Finally, under that, he writes:

Start telling a few lies?



HE PULLS HIS storm coat on as he leaves the tent, partly to fend off the rain, and partly to cover his jacket. It's his number one staff-issue field jacket, but it's become too soiled with clay from the trek out of Voltis City to wear with any dignity. He has a grubby, old number two issue that he keeps in his kit as a spare, but it still has Hyrkan patches on the collar, the shoulders and the cuffs, and that's embarrassing. Sym would have patched the skull-and-crossed-knives of the Tanith onto it by now. He'd have got out his sewing kit and made sure both of Gaunt's field uniforms were code perfect, the way he kept the rest of Gaunt's day-to-day life neat and sewn up tight.

Steamy smoke is rising from the cowed chimneys of the cook-tents, and he can smell the greasy blocks of processed nutrition fibre being fried. His stomach rumbles. He sets off towards the kitchens. Beyond the row of mess tents lies the canvas city of the Tanith position, and to the north-east of that, the batteries of the Ketzok.

Beyond that, the edge of the skyline flicks on and off with the unnervingly quiet lightning, far away, like a malfunctioning lamp filament that refuses to stay lit.

Slab is pretty gruesome stuff. Pressure-treated down from any and all available nutritional sources by the Munitorum, it has no discernible flavour apart from a faint, mucousy aftertaste, and it looks like grey-white putty. In fact, years before at Schola Progenium on Ignatius Cardinal, an acquaintance of Gaunt's had once kneaded some of it into a form that authentically resembled a brick of plastic explosive, complete with fuses, and then carried out a practical joke on the Master of the Scholam Arsenal that was notable for both the magnificent extent of the disruption it caused, and the stunning severity of the subsequent punishment. Slab, as it's known to every common Guard lasman, comes canned and it comes freeze-dried, it comes in packets and it comes in boxes, it comes in individual heated tins and it comes in catering blocks. Company cooks slice, dice and mince it, and use it as the bulk base of any meal when local provision sources are unavailable. They flavour it with whatever they have to hand, usually foil sachets of powder with names like groxtail and vegetable (root) and sausage (assorted). Ibram Gaunt has lived on it for a great deal of his adult and sub-adult

life. He is so used to the stuff, he actually misses it when it isn't around.

Men have gathered around the cook tents, huddled against the weather under their camo-cloaks. Gaunt still hasn't got used to wearing his, even though he'd promised the Tanith colonel he would, as a show of unity. It doesn't hang right around him, and in the Voltemand wind, it tugs and tangles like a devil.

The Tanith don't seem to have the same trouble. They half-watch him approach, shrouded, hooded, some supping from mess cans. They watch him approach. There is a shadow in their eyes. They are a wild lot. Beads of rainwater glint in their tangled dark hair, though occasionally the glints are studs or nose rings, piercings in lips or eyebrows. They like their ink, the Tanith, and they wear the complex, traditional patterns of blue and green on their pale skins with pride. Cheeks, throats, forearms and the backs of hands display spirals and loops, leaves and branches, sigils and whorls. They also like their edges. The Tanith weapon is a long knife with a straight, silver blade that has evolved from a hunting tool. They could hunt with it well enough, silently, like phantoms.

Gaunt's Ghosts. Someone had come up with that within a few days of their first deployment on Blackshard. It had been the sociopath with the long-las, as Gaunt recalled it, a man known to him as "Mad". A more withering and scornful nickname, Gaunt can't imagine.



RAWNE SAYS, "HERE comes the fether now."

He takes a sip from his water bottle, which does not contain water, and turns as if to say something to Murt Feygor.

"But I paid you that back!" Feygor exclaims, managing to make his voice sound wounded and plaintive, the wronged party.

Rawne makes a retort and steps back, in time to affect a blind collision with Gaunt as he makes his way into the cook tent. The impact is hard enough to rock Gaunt off his feet.

"Easy there, sir!" cries Varl, hooking a hand under Gaunt's armpit to keep him off the ground. He hoists Gaunt up.

“Thank you,” Gaunt says.

“Varl, sir,” replies the trooper. He grins a big, shit-eating grin. “Infantryman first class Ceglan Varl, sir. Wouldn’t want you taking a tumble now, would I, sir? Wouldn’t want you to go falling over and getting yourself all dirty.”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t, trooper,” says Gaunt. “Carry on.”

He looks back at Rawne and Feygor.

“That was all me, sir,” says Feygor, hands up. “The major and I were having a little dispute, and I distracted him.”

It sounds convincing. Gaunt doesn’t know much about the trooper called Feygor, but he’s met his type before, a conniving son of a bitch who has been blessed with the silken vocal talent to sell any story to anyone.

Gaunt doesn’t even bother looking at him. He stares at Rawne.

Major Rawne stares right back. His handsome face betrays no emotion whatsoever. Gaunt is a tall man, but Rawne is one of the Tanith he doesn’t tower over, and he only has a few pounds on the major.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Rawne says.

“Do you, Rawne? Is that an admission of unholy gifts? Should I call for emissaries of the Ordos to examine you?”

“Ha ha,” says Rawne in a laugh-less voice. He just says the sounds. “Look, that there was a genuine slip, sir. A genuine bump. But we have a little history, sir, you and I, so you’re bound to ascribe more motive to it than that.”

A little history. In the Blackshard deadzones, Rawne had used the opportunity of a quiet moment alone with Gaunt to express his dissatisfaction with Gaunt’s leadership in the strongest possible terms. Gaunt had disarmed him and carried Rawne’s unconscious body clear of the fighting area. It’s hard to say what part of that history yanks Rawne most: the fact that he had failed to murder Gaunt, or the fact that Gaunt had saved him.

“Wow,” says Gaunt.

“What?”

“You used the word ascribe,” says Gaunt, and turns to go into the cook tent. Over his shoulder, he calls out, “If you say it was a bump, then it was a bump, major. We need to trust each other.”

Gaunt turns and looks back.

“Starting in about twenty minutes. After breakfast, I’m going to take an advance out to get a look at Kosdorf. You’ll be in charge.”

They watch him pick up a mess tin from the pile and head towards the slab vat where the cook is waiting with a ladle and an apologetic expression.



HE SITS DOWN with his tin at one of the mess benches. The slab seems to have been refried and then stewed along with something that was either string or mechanically recovered gristle. “I don’t know how you can eat that.”

Gaunt looks up. It’s the boy, the civilian boy. The boy sits down facing him.

“Sit down, if you like,” Gaunt says.

Milo looks pinched with cold, and he has his arms wrapped around his body.

“That stuff,” he says, jutting his chin suspiciously in the direction of Gaunt’s tin. “It’s not proper food. I thought Imperial Guardsmen were supposed to get proper food. I thought that was the Compact of Service between the Munitorum and the Guardsman: three square meals a day.”

“This is proper food.”

The boy shakes his head. He is only about seventeen, but he’s going to be big when he fills out. There’s a blue fish inked over his right eye.

“It’s not proper food,” he insists.

“Well, you’re not a proper Guardsman, so you’re not entitled to a proper opinion.”

The boy looks hurt. Gaunt doesn’t want to be mean. He owes Brin Milo a great deal. Two people had gone beyond the call to help Ibram Gaunt get off Tanith alive. Sym had been one, and the man had died making the effort. Milo had been the other. The boy was just a servant, a piper appointed by the Elector of Tanith Magna to wait on Gaunt during his stay. Gaunt understands why the boy has stuck with the regiment since the Tanith disaster. The regiment is all Milo has left, all he has left of his people, and he feels he has nowhere else to go, but Gaunt wishes Milo would disappear. There are camps and shelters, there are Munitorum refugee programmes. Civilians didn’t belong at the frontline. They remind troopers of what they’ve left behind or, in the Tanith case, lost forever. They erode morale. Gaunt has suggested several times that Milo might be better off at a camp at Voltis City. He even has enough pull left to get Milo sent to a Schola Progenium or an orphanage for the officer class.

Milo refuses to leave. It’s as if he’s waiting for something to happen, for someone to arrive or something to be revealed. It’s as if he’s waiting for Gaunt to

make good on a promise.

“Did you want something?” Gaunt asks.

“I want to come.”

“Come where?”

“You’re going to scout the approach to Kosdorf this morning. I want to come.”

Gaunt feels a little flush of anger. “Rawne tell you that?”

“No one told me.”

“Caffran, then. Damn, I thought Caffran might be trustworthy.”

“No one told me,” says Milo. “I mean it. I just had a feeling, a feeling you’d go out this morning. This whole taskforce was sent to clear Kosdorf, wasn’t it?”

“This whole taskforce was intended to be an instrument of petty and spiteful vengeance,” Gaunt replies.

“By whom?” asks Milo.

Gaunt finishes the last of his slab. He drops the fork into the empty tin. Not the best he’d ever had. Throne knows, not the worst, either. “That general,” Gaunt says. “General Sturm?”

“That’s the one,” Gaunt nods. “General Noches Sturm of the 50th Volpone. He was trying to use the Tanith First, and we made him look like a prize scrotum by taking Voltis when his oh-so-mighty Bluebloods couldn’t manage the trick. Throne, he even let us ship back to the transport fleet before deciding we should stay another month or so to help clean up. He’s done it all to inconvenience us. Pack, unpack. Ship to orbit, return to surface. March out into the backwaters of a defeated world to check the ruins of a dead city.”

“Make you eat crap instead of fresh rations?” asks Milo, looking at the mess tin.

“That too, probably,” says Gaunt.

“Probably shouldn’t have pissed him off, then,” says Milo.

“I really probably shouldn’t,” Gaunt agrees. “Never mind, I heard he’s getting retasked. If the Emperor shows me any providence, I’ll never have to see Sturm again.”

“He’ll get his just desserts,” says Milo.

“What does that mean?” asks Gaunt.

Milo shrugs. “I dunno. It just feels that way to me. People get what they deserve, sooner or later. The universe always gets payback. One day, somebody will stick it to Sturm just like he’s sticking it to you.”

“Well, that thought’s cheered me up,” says Gaunt, “except the part about getting what you deserve. What does the universe have in store for me, do you

suppose, after what happened to Tanith?”

“You only need to worry about that if you think you did anything wrong,” says Milo. “If your conscience is clear, the universe will know.”

“You talk to it much?”

“What?”

“The universe? You’re on first name terms?” Milo pulls a face.

“Things could be worse, anyway,” Milo says.

“How?”

“Well, you’re in charge. You’re in charge of this whole task force.”

“For my sins.”

Gaunt gets to his feet. A Munitorum skivvy comes by and collects his tin.

“So?” asks Milo. “Can I come?”

“No,” says Gaunt.



HE’S WALKED A few yards from the mess tents when Milo calls out after him. With a resigned weariness, Gaunt turns back to look at the boy.

“What?” he asks. “I said no.”

“Take your cape,” says Milo.

“What?”

“Take your cape with you.”

“Why?”

Milo looks startled for a moment, as if he doesn’t want to give the answer, or it hadn’t occurred to him that anyone would need one. He dithers for a second, and seems to be making something up.

“Because Colonel Corbec likes it when you wear it,” he says. “He thinks it shows respect.”

Gaunt nods. Good enough.



THE ADVANCE IS waiting for him at the north post, the end marker of the camp area. There are two batteries of Ketzok Hydras there, barrels elevated at a murky sky that occasionally blinks with silent light. Gunners sit dripping under oilskin coats on the lee side of their gun-carriages. Tracks are sunk deep in oozing grey clay. Rain hisses. “Nice day for it,” says Colm Corbec.

“I arranged the weather especially, colonel,” replies Gaunt as he walks up. The clay is wretchedly sticky underfoot. It sucks at their boots. The men in the three squads look entirely underwhelmed at the prospect of the morning’s mission. The only ones amongst them who aren’t standing slope-shouldered and dejected are the three scout specialists that Corbec has chosen to round out the advance. One is the leader of the scout unit, Mkoll. Gaunt has already begun to admire Mkoll’s abilities, but he has no read on the man himself. Mkoll is sort of nondescript, of medium build and modest appearance, and seems a little weatherbeaten and older than the rank and file. He chooses to say very little.

Gaunt hasn’t yet learned the names of the two scouts with Mkoll. One, he believes, he has overheard someone refer to as “lucky”. The other one, the taller, thinner one, has a silent, faraway look about him that’s oddly menacing.

“It may just have been me,” says Corbec, “but didn’t we spend an hour or so in the tent this morning agreeing not to do this?” Gaunt nods.

“I thought,” says Corbec, “we were to stay put until the Ketzok had been resupplied?”

They were. The purpose of the expedition is to evaluate and secure Kosdorf, Voltemand’s second city, which had been effectively taken out in the early stages of the liberation. Orbit watch reports it as ruined, a city grave, but the emergency government and the Administratum want it locked down. The whole thing is a colossal waste of time. Voltis City, which had been the stronghold for the charismatic but now dead Archenemy demagogue Chanthar, was the key to Voltemand. The Kosdorf securement is the sort of mission that could have been handled by PDF or a third-tier Guard strength.

General Sturm is playing games, of course, getting his own back, and doing it in such a way as to make it look like he is being magnanimous. As his last act before passing control of the Voltemand theatre to a successor, Sturm appointed

Gaunt to lead the expedition to Kosdorf, a command of twenty thousand men including his own Tanith, a regiment of Litus Battlefield Regimental Units, and a decent support spread of Ketzok armour.

Everyone, including the Litus and the Ketzok, have seen it for what it is, so they've started making heavy going of it, dragging their heels. At this last encampment, supposedly the final staging point before a proper run into Kosdorf, the Ketzok have complained that their ammo trains have fallen behind, and demanded a delay of thirty-six hours until they can be sure of their supplies.

The Ketzok are a decent lot. Despite a bad incident during the Voltis attack, Gaunt has developed a good working relationship with the armoured brigade, but Sturm's edict has taken the warmth out of it. The Ketzok aren't being difficult with him, they're being difficult with the situation.

"The Ketzok can stay put," says Gaunt. "There's no harm getting some exercise though, is there?"

"I suppose not," Corbec agrees.

"In this muck?" someone in the ranks calls out from behind him.

"That's enough, Larks," Corbec says without turning. Corbec is a big fellow, tall and broad, and heavy. He raises a large hand, scoops the heavy crop of slightly greying hair out of his face, and flops it over his scalp before tying it back. Raindrops twinkle like diamonds in his beard. Despite the bullying wind, Gaunt can smell a faint odour of cigars on him.

Gaunt wonders how he's going to begin to enforce uniform code when the company colonel looks like a matted and tangled old man of the woods.

"This is just going to be a visit to size the place up," says Gaunt, looking at Mkoll. "I intend for us to be back before nightfall." Mkoll just nods.

"So what you're saying is you were getting a little bored sitting in your tent," says Corbec. Gaunt looks at him.

"That's all right," Corbec smiles. "I was getting pretty bored sitting in mine. A walk is nice, isn't it, lads?"

No one actually answers.

Gaunt walks the line with Corbec at his side, inspecting munition supplies. They're going to be moving light, but every other man's got an extra musette bag of clips, and two troopers are carrying boxes of RPGs for the launcher. Nobody makes eye contact with Gaunt as he passes.

Gaunt comes to Caffran in the line.

"What are you doing here?" Gaunt asks.

"Step forward, trooper," says Corbec.

“I thought I was supposed to stay with you all day,” Caffran replies, stepping forward. “I thought those were my orders.”

“Sir,” says Corbec. “Sir,” says Caffran.

“I suppose they are,” says Gaunt and nods Caffran back into the file. A march in the mud and rain is the least you deserve for talking out of turn, Gaunt thinks, especially to a civilian.

There’s a muttering somewhere. They’re amused by Caffran’s insolence. Gaunt gets the feeling that Corbec doesn’t like it, though Corbec does little to show it. The colonel’s position is difficult. If he reinforces Gaunt’s authority, he risks losing all the respect the men have for him. He risks being despised and resented too.

“Let’s get moving,” says Gaunt.

“Advance company!” Corbec shouts, holding one hand above his head and rotating it with the index finger upright. “Sergeant Blane, if you please!”

“Yes, sir!” Blane calls out from the front of the formation. He leads off.

The force begins to move down the track into the rain behind the sergeant. Mkoll and his scouts, moving at a more energetic pace, take point and begin to pull away.

Gaunt waits as the infantrymen file past, their boots glopping in the mire. Not one of them so much as glances at him. They have their heads down.

He jogs to catch up with Corbec. He had hoped that getting out and doing something active might chase away his unhappiness. It isn’t working so far.

He still has that letter in his pocket.



“BACK AGAIN?” ASKS Dorden, the medicae.

The boy hovers in the doorway of the medical tent like a spectre that needs to be invited in out of the dark. The rain has picked up, and it’s pattering a loud tattoo off the overhead sheets.

“I don’t feel right,” says Milo.

Dorden tilts his chair back to upright and takes his feet down off the side of a

cot. He folds over the corner of a page to mark his place, and sets his book aside.

“Come in, Milo,” he says.

In the back of the long tent behind Dorden, the medicae orderlies are at work checking supplies and cleaning instruments. The morning has brought the usual round of complaints generated by an army on the move: foot problems, gum problems, and gut problems, along with longer term conditions like venereal infections and wounds healing after the Voltis fight. The orderlies are chattering back and forth. Chayker and Ioskin are play-fencing with forceps as they gather up instruments for cleaning. Lesp, the other orderly, is bantering with them as he prepares his needles. He’s got a sideline as the company inksman. His work is generally held as the best. The ink stains his fingertips permanent blue-black, the dirtiest-looking fingers Dorden’s ever seen on a medical orderly.

“How don’t you feel right?” Dorden asks as Milo comes in. The boy pulls the tent flap shut behind him and shrugs.

“I just don’t,” he says. “I feel light-headed.”

“Light-headed? Faint, you mean?”

“Things seem familiar. Do you know what I mean?”

Dorden shakes his head gently, frowning.

“Like I’m seeing things again for the first time,” says the boy.

Dorden points to a folding stool, which Milo sits down on obediently, and reaches for his pressure cuff.

“You realise this is the third day you’ve come in here saying you don’t feel right?” asks Dorden.

Milo nods.

“You know what I think it is?” asks Dorden.

“What?”

“I think you’re hungry,” says Dorden. “I know you hate the ration stuff they cook up. I don’t blame you. It’s swill. But you’ve got to eat, Brin. That’s why you’re light-headed and weak.”

“It’s not that,” says Milo.

“It might be. You don’t like the food.”

“No, I don’t like the food. I admit it. But it’s not that.”

“What then?”

Milo stares at him.

“I’ve got this feeling. I think I had a bad dream. I’ve got this feeling that—”

“What?”

Milo looks at the ground.

“Listen to me,” says Dorden. “I know you want to stay with us. This man Gaunt is letting you stay. You know he should have sent you away by now. If you get sick on him, if you get sick by refusing to eat properly, he’ll have the excuse he needs. He’ll be able to tell himself he’s sending you away for your own good. And that’ll be it.”

Milo nods.

“So let’s do you a favour,” says Dorden. “Let’s go to the mess tent and get you something to eat. Humour me. Eat it. If you still feel you’re not right, well, then we can have another conversation.”



THE LIGHTNING LEADS them. The rain persists. They come up over the wet hills and see the city grave.

Kosdorf is a great expanse of ruins, most of it pale, like sugar icing. As they approach it, coming in from the south-east, the slumped and toppled hab blocks remind Gaunt more than anything of great, multi-tiered cakes, fancy and celebratory, that have been shoved over so that all the frosted levels have crashed down and overlapped one another, breaking and cracking, and shedding palls of dust that have become mire in the rain. A shroud of vapour hangs over the city, the foggy aftermath of destruction.

Overhead, black clouds mark the sky like ink on pale skin. Shafts of lightning, painfully bright, shoot down from the clouds into the dripping ruins, straight down, without a sound. The bars underlight the belly of the clouds, and set off brief, white flashes in amongst the ruins where they hit, like flares. Though the lightning strikes crackle with secondary sparks, like capillaries adjoining a main blood vessel, they are remarkably straight.

The regular strobing makes the daylight seem strange and impermanent. Everything is pinched and blue, caught in a twilight.

“Why can’t we hear it?” one of the men grumbles.

Gaunt has called a stop on a deep embankment so he can check his chart. Tilting, teetering building shells overhang them. Water gurgles out of them.

“Because we can’t, Larks,” Corbec says.

Gaunt looks up from his chart, and sees Larkin, the marksman assigned to the advance. The famous Mad Larkin. Gaunt is still learning names to go with faces, but Larkin has stood out from early on. The man can shoot. He’s also, it seems to Gaunt, one of the least stable individuals ever to pass recruitment screening. Gaunt presumes the former fact had a significant bearing on the latter.

Larkin is a skinny, unhappy-looking soul with a dragon-spiral inked onto his cheek. His long-las rifle is propped over his shoulder in its weather case.

“Altitude,” Gaunt says to him.

“Come again, sir?” Larkin replies.

Gaunt gestures up at the sky behind the bent, blackened girders of the corpse-buildings above them. Larkin looks where he’s pointing, up into the rain.

“The electrical discharge is firing from cloud to cloud up there, and it can reach an intensity of four hundred thousand amps. But we can’t hear the thunder, because it’s so high up.”

“Oh,” says Larkin. Some of the other men murmur.

“You think I’d march anyone into a dead zone without getting a full orbital sweep first?” Gaunt asks.

Larkin looks like he’s going to reply. He looks like he’s about to say something he shouldn’t, something his brain won’t allow his mouth to police.

But he shakes his head instead and smiles.

“Is that so?” he says. “Too high for us to hear. Well, well.”

They move off down the embankment, and then follow the seam of an old river sluice that hugs the route of a highway into the city. There’s a fast stream running down the bed of the drain, dirty rainwater that’s washed down through the city ruin, blackened with ash, and then is running off. It splashes and froths around their toecaps. Its babbling sounds like voices, muttering.

There’s the noise of the falling rain all around, the sound of dripping. Things creak. Tiles and facings and pieces of roof and guttering hang from shredded bulks, and move as the inclination of gravity or the wind takes them. They squeak like crane hoists, like gibbets. Things fall, and flutter softly or land hard, or skitter and bounce like loose rocks in a ravine.

The scouts vanish ahead of the advance, but Mkoll reappears after half an hour, and describes the route ahead to Corbec. Gaunt stands with them, but there is subtle body language, suggesting that the report is meant for Corbec’s benefit, and Gaunt is merely being allowed to listen in. If things turn bad, Mkoll is trusting Corbec to look after the best interests of the men.

“Firestorms have swept through this borough,” he says. “There’s not much of anything left. I suggest we swing east.”

Corbec nods.

“There’s something here,” Mkoll adds.

“A friendly something?” Corbec asks. Mkoll shrugs.

“Hard to say. It won’t let us get a look at it. Could be civilian survivors. They would have learned to stay well out of sight.”

“I would have expected any citizens to flee the city,” says Gaunt. Mkoll and Corbec look at him. “Flight is not always the solution,” says Mkoll.

“Sometimes, you know, people are traumatised,” says Corbec. “They go back to a place, even when they shouldn’t. Even when it’s not safe.” Mkoll shrugs again. “It’s all I’m saying,” says Corbec.

“I haven’t seen bodies,” replies Gaunt. “When you consider the size of this place, the population it must have had. In fact, I haven’t seen any bodies.”

Corbec purses his lips thoughtfully.

“True enough. That is curious.” Corbec looks at Mkoll for confirmation.

“I haven’t seen any,” says Mkoll. “But hungry vermin can disintegrate remains inside a week.”

They turn to the east, as per Mkoll’s suggestion, and leave the comparative cover of the rockcrete drainage ditch. Buildings have sagged into each other, or fallen into the street in great splashes of rubble and ejecta. Some habs lean on their neighbours for support. All glass has been broken, and the joists and beams and roofs, robbed of tiles or slates, have been turned into dark, barred windows through which to watch the lightning.

The fire has been very great. It has scorched the paving stones of the streets and squares, and the rain has turned the ash into a black paste that sticks to everything, except the heat-transmuted metals and glass from windows and doors. These molten ingots, now solid again, have been washed clean by the rain and lie scattered like iridescent fish on the tarry ground.

Gaunt has seen towns and cities without survivors before. Before Khulan, before the Crusade even began, he’d been with the Hyrkans on Sorsarah. A town there, he forgets the name, an agri-berg, had been under attack, and the town elders had ordered the entire population to shelter in the precincts of the basilica. In doing so, they had become one target.

When Gaunt had come in with the Hyrkans, whole swathes of the town were untouched, intact, preserved, as though the inhabitants would be back at any moment.

The precincts of the basilica formed a crater half a kilometre across.

They stop to rest at the edge of a broad concourse where the wind of Voltemand, brisk and unfriendly, is absent. The rain is relentless still, but the vapour hangs here, a mist that pools around the dismal ruins and broken walls.

They are drawing closer to the grounding lightning. It leaves a bloody stink in their nostrils, like hot wire, and whenever it hits the streets and ruins nearby, it makes a soft but jarring click, part overpressure, part discharge.

An explosive device of considerable magnitude has struck the corner of the concourse and detonated, unseating all the heavy paving slabs with the rippling force of a major earthquake. Gravity has relaid the slabs after the shockwave, but they have come back down to earth misaligned and overlapping, like the scales of a lizard, rather than the seamless, edge-to-edge fit the city fathers had once commissioned.

Larkin sits down on a tumbled block, takes off one boot, and begins to massage his foot. He complains to the men around him in a loud voice. The core of his complaint seems to be the stiff and unyielding quality of the newly-issued Tanith kit.

“Foot sore?” Gaunt asks him.

“These boots don’t give. We’ve walked too far. My toes hurt.”

“Get the medicae to treat your foot when we get back. I don’t want any infections.” Larkin grins up at him.

“I wouldn’t want to make my foot worse. Maybe you should carry me.”

“You’ll manage,” Gaunt tells him.

“But an infection? That sounds nasty. It can get in your blood. You can die of it.”

“You’re right,” Gaunt says. “The only way to be properly sure is to amputate the extremity before infection can spread.” He puts his hand on the pommel of his chainsword. “Is that what you want me to do, Larkin?”

“I’ll be happy to live out me born days without that ever happening, colonel-commissar,” Larkin chuckles.

“Get your boot back on.”

Gaunt wanders over to Corbec. The colonel has produced a short, black cigar and clamped it in his mouth, though he hasn’t lit it. He takes another out of his pocket and offers it to Gaunt, perhaps hoping that if Gaunt accepts it, it’ll give him the latitude to break field statutes and light up. Gaunt refuses the offer.

“Is Larkin taunting me?” Gaunt asks him quietly.

Corbec shakes his head.

“He’s nervous,” Corbec replies. “Larks gets spooked very easily, so this is him dealing with that. Trust me. I’ve known him since we were in the Tanith Magna Militia together.”

Gaunt throws a half shrug, looking around.

“He’s spooked? I’m spooked,” he says.

Corbec smiles so broadly he takes the cigar out of his mouth. “Good to know,” he says.

“Maybe we should head back,” Gaunt says. “Push back in tomorrow with some proper armour support.”

“Best plan you’ve had so far,” says Corbec, “if I may say so.”

The Tanith scout, the tall, thin man with the menacing air, appears suddenly at the top of a ridge of rubble and signals before dropping out of sight.

“What the hell?” Gaunt begins to say. He glances around to have the signal explained by Corbec or one of the men. He is alone on the concourse. The Tanith have vanished.



WHAT THE FETH is he doing, Caffran wonders? He’s just standing there. He’s just standing there out in the open, when Mkvenner clearly signalled...

He hears a sound like a bundle of sticks being broken, slowly, steadily.

Not sticks, las-shots; the sound echoes around the concourse area. He sees a couple of bolts in the air like luminous birds or lost fragments of lightning.

With a sigh, Caffran launches himself from under the cover of his camo-cloak, and tackles Colonel-Commissar Gaunt to the ground. Further shots fly over them.

“What are you playing at?” Caffran snaps. They struggle to find some cover.

“Where did everyone go?” Gaunt demands, ducking lower as a zipping las-round scorches the edge of his cap.

“Into cover, you feth-wipe!” Caffran replies. “Get your cloak over you! Come on!”

The ingrained, starch-stiff commissar inside Gaunt wants to reprimand the

infantryman for his language and his disrespect, but tone of address is hardly the point in the heat of a contact. Perhaps afterwards. Perhaps a few words afterwards.

Gaunt fumbles out his camo-cloak, still folded up and rolled over the top of his belt pouch. He realises the Tanith haven't vanished at all. At the scout's signal, they have all simply dropped and concealed themselves with their cloaks. They are still all around him. They have simply become part of the landscape.

He, on the other hand, nonplussed for a second, had remained standing; the lone figure of an Imperial Guard commissar against a bleak, empty background.

The behaviour of a novice. A fool. A... what was it? Feth-wipe? Indeed.

Corbec looks over at him, his face framed between the gunsight of his rifle and the fringe of his cape.

"How many?" Gaunt hisses.

"Ven said seven, maybe eight," Corbec calls back.

Gaunt pulls out his bolt pistol and racks it.

"Return fire," he orders.

Corbec relays the order, and the advance company begins to shoot. Volleys of las-shots whip across the concourse. The gunfire coming their way stops. "Cease fire!" Gaunt commands.

He gets up, and scurries forwards over the rubble, keeping low. Corbec calls after him in protest, but nobody shoots at Gaunt. You didn't have to be a graduate of a fancy military academy, Corbec reflects, to appreciate that was a good sign. He sighs, gets up, and goes after Gaunt. They move forwards together, heads down.

"Look here," says Corbec.

Two bodies lie on the rubble. They are wearing the armoured uniform of the local PDF, caked with black mud. Their cheeks are shrunken, as if neither of them have eaten a decent plate of anything in a month.

"Damn," says Gaunt, "was that a mistaken exchange? Have we hit some friendlies? These are Planetary Defence Force."

"I think you're right," says Corbec.

"I am right. Look at the insignia."

"Poor fething bastards," says Corbec. "Maybe they've been holed up here for so long, they thought we were—"

"No," says Mkoll.

Gaunt hasn't seen the scout standing there. Even Corbec seems to start slightly, though Gaunt wonders if this is for comic effect. Corbec is unfailingly

cheerful.

The chief scout has manifested even more mysteriously than the Tanith had vanished a few minutes ago.

“There was a group of them,” he says, “a patrol. Mkvenner and I had contact. We challenged them, making the same assumption you just did, that they were PDF. There was no mistake.”

“What do you mean?” asks Gaunt.

“I thought maybe they were scared,” says Mkoll, “scared of everything. Survivors in the rubble, afraid that anything they bumped into might be the Archenemy. But this wasn’t scared.”

“How do you know?” asks Gaunt.

“He knows,” says Corbec.

“I’d like him to explain,” says Gaunt.

“You know the difference between scared and crazy, sir?” Mkoll asks him.

“I think so,” says Gaunt.

“These men were crazy. They were speaking in strange tongues. They were ranting. They were using language I’ve never heard before, a language I never much want to hear again.”

“So you think there are Archenemy strengths here in Kosdorf, and they’re using PDF arms and uniforms?”

Mkoll nods. “I heard the tribal forces often use captured Guard kit.”

“That’s true enough,” says Gaunt.

“Where did the others go?” asks Corbec, looking down at the corpses glumly.

“They ran when your first couple of volleys brought these two over,” said Mkoll.

“Let’s circle up and head back,” says Corbec.

There’s a sudden noise, a voice, gunfire. One of the other scouts has reappeared. He is hurrying back across the fish-scale slabs of the square towards them, firing off bursts from the hip. A rain of las-fire answers him. It cracks paving stones, pings pebbles, and spits up plumes of muck.

“Find cover!” the scout yells as he comes towards them. “Find cover!”

They have jammed a stick into the ruins of Kosdorf, and wiggled it around until the nest underneath the city has been thoroughly disturbed.

Hostiles in PDF kit, caked in dirt, looking feral and thin, are assaulting the concourse area through the ruins of an old Ecclesiarchy temple and, to the west of that, the bones of a pauper’s hospital.

They look like ghosts.

They come surging forwards, out of the dripping shadows, through the mist, into the strobing twilight. In their captured kit, they look to Gaunt like war-shocked survivors trying to defend what's left of their world.

"Fall back!" Corbec yells.

"I don't want to fight them," Gaunt says to him as they run for better cover. "Not if they're our own!"

"Mkoll was pretty sure they weren't!"

"He could have been wrong. These could be our people, come through hell. I don't want to fight them unless I have to."

"I don't think they're going to give us a choice!" Corbec yells back.

The Tanith are returning fire, snapping shots from their corner of the open space. The air fills with a laced crossfire of energy bolts. The mist seems to thicken as the crossfire stirs the air. Gaunt sees a couple of the men in Kosdorfer uniforms crumple and fall.

"In the name of the Emperor, cease your firing," he hollers out across the square. "For Throne's sake, we serve the same master!"

The Kosdorf PDFers shout back. The words are unintelligible, hard to make out over their sustained gunfire.

"I said in the name of the Emperor, hold your fire," Gaunt bellows. "Hold your fire. I command you! We're here to help you!"

A PDFer comes at him from the left, running out of the shadows of the hospital ruins. The man has a hard-round rifle equipped with a sword bayonet. His eyes are swollen in their sockets, and one pupil has blown.

He tries to ram the bayonet into Gaunt's gut. The blade is rusty, but the thrust is strong and practised. Gaunt leaps backwards.

"For the Emperor!" Gaunt yells.

The man replies with a jabbering stream of obscenity. The words are broken, and have been purloined from an alien language, and he is only able to pronounce the parts of them that fit a human mouth and voice-box. Blood leaks out of his gums and dribbles over his cracked lips.

He lunges again. The tip of the sword bayonet goes through Gaunt's storm coat and snags the hip pocket of his field jacket underneath.

Gaunt shoots the man in the face with his bolt pistol.

The corpse goes over backwards, hard. Bloody back-spatter over-paints the dirt filming Gaunt's face and clothes.

"Fire, fire! Fire at will!" Gaunt yells. He's seen enough. "Men of Tanith, pick your targets and fire at will!"

Another PDFer charges in at him through an archway, backlit for a second by a pulse of lightning. He fires a shot from his rifle that hits the wall behind Gaunt and adds to the wet haze fuming the air. Gaunt fires back and knocks the man out of the archway, tumbling into two of his brethren.

The Tanith advance has been rotated out of line by the sudden attack, and Gaunt has been pushed to the eastern end of the formation. He has lost sight of Corbec. It is hard to issue any useful commands, because he has little proper overview on which to base command choices.

Gaunt tries to reposition himself. He hugs the shadows, keeping the crumbling pillars to his back. The firefight has lit up the entire concourse. He listens to the echoes, to the significant sound values coming off the Tanith positions. Gaunt can hear the hard clatter of full auto and, in places along the rubble line, see the jumping petals of muzzle flashes. The Tanith are eager, but inexperienced. The lasrifles they have been issued with at the Founding are good, new weapons, fresh-stamped and shipped in from forge worlds. Many of the Tanith recruits will never have had an automatic setting on a weapon before; most will have been used to single shot or even hard-round weapons. Finding themselves in a troop-fight ambush, they are unleashing maximum firepower, which is great for shock and noise but not necessarily the most effective tactic, under any circumstances.

“Corbec!” Gaunt yells. “Colonel Corbec! Tell the men to select single f—”

He ducks back as his voice draws enemy fire. Plumes of mire and slime spurt up from the slabs he is using as cover. Impacts spit out stinging particles of stone. He tries shouting again, but the concentration of fire gets worse. The vapour billowing off the shot marks gets in his mouth and makes him retch and spit. Two or three of the PDFers have advanced on his position, and are keeping a heavy fire rate sustained. He can half see them through the veiling mist, calmly standing and taking shots at him. He can't see them well enough to get a decent shot back.

Gaunt scrambles backwards, dropping down about a metre between one rucked level of paving slabs and another, an ugly seismic fracture in the street. Loose shots are whining over his head, smacking into the plaster facade of a reclining guild house and covering it with black pockmarks. He clammers in through a staring window.

A Tanith trooper inside switches aim at him and nearly shoots him.

“Sacred feth. Sorry, sir!” the trooper exclaims.

Gaunt shakes his head.

“I snuck up on you,” he replies.

There are four Tanith men in the ground floor of the guild house. They are using the buckled window apertures to lay fire across the concourse from the east. They'd been on the eastern end of the advance force when it turned unexpectedly, and thus have been effectively cut off. Gaunt can't chastise them. Oddities of terrain and the dynamic flow of a combat situation do that sometimes. Sometimes you just get stuck in a tight corner.

For similar reasons, he's got stuck there with them.

"What's your name?" he asks the man who'd almost shot him, even though he knows it perfectly well.

"Domor," the man replies.

"I don't think we want to spend too much more time in here, do we, Domor?" Gaunt says. Enemy fire is pattering off the outside walls with increasing fury. It is causing the building to vibrate, and spills of earth, like sand in a time-glass, are sifting down from the bulging roof. There's a stink of sewage, of broken drains. If enemy fire doesn't finish them, it will finish the building, which will die on their heads.

"I'd certainly like to get out of here if I can, sir," Domor replies. He has a sharp, intelligent face, with quick eyes that suggest wit and honesty.

"Well, we'll see what we can do," Gaunt says.

One of the other men groans suddenly.

"What's up, Piet?" Domor calls. "You hit?"

The trooper is down at one of the windows, pinking rounds off into the concourse outside. "I'm fine," he answers, "but do you hear that?"

Gaunt and Domor clamber up to the sill alongside him. For a moment, Gaunt can't hear anything except the snap and whine of las-fire, and the brittle rattle of masonry debris falling from the roof above.

Then he hears it, a deeper noise, a throaty rasp.

"Someone's got a burner," says the trooper in a depressed tone. "Someone out there's got a burner." Domor looks at Gaunt.

"Gutes is right, isn't he?" he asks. "That's a flamer, isn't it? That's the noise a flamer makes?" Gaunt nods. "Yes," he says.



NONE OF THE Munitorum skivvies has the nerve to argue when Feygor helps himself to one of the full pots of caffeine on the mess tent stove.

Feygor carries the pot over to where Rawne is sitting at a mess table with the usual repeat offenders. Meryn, young and eager to impress, has brought a tray of tin cups. Brostin is smoking a lho-stick and flicking his brass igniter open and shut. Raess is cleaning his scope. Caober is putting an edge on his blade. Costin has produced his flask, and is pouring a jigger of sacra into each mug “to keep the rain out”.

Feygor dishes out the brew from the pot.

“Come on, then,” says Rawne.

Varl grins, and slides the letter out of his inside pocket. He holds it gently by the bottom corners and sniffs it, as though it is a perfumed billet-doux. Then he licks the tip of his right index finger to lift the envelope’s flap.

He starts to read to himself.

“Oh my!” he says.

“What?” asks Meryn.

“Listen to this... My darling Ibram, how I long for your strong, manly touch...” Varl begins, as if reading aloud.

“Don’t be a feth-head, Varl,” warns Rawne. “What does it actually say?”

“It’s from somebody called Blenner,” says Varl, scanning the sheet. “It goes on a bit. Umm, I think they knew each other years back. And from the date on this, he’s been carrying it around for a while. This Blenner says he’s writing because he can’t believe that Gaunt got passed over after ‘all he did at Balhaut’. He’s asking Gaunt if he chose to go with ‘that bunch of no-hope backwoodsmen’, which I think would be us.”

“It would,” says Rawne.

Varl sniffs. “Anyway, this charming fellow Blenner says he can’t believe Gaunt would have taken the field promotion willingly. Listen to this, he says, ‘what was Slaydo thinking? Surely the Old Man had made provision for you to be part of the command structure that succeeded him. Throne’s sake, Ibram! You know he was grooming! How did you let this slight happen to you? Slaydo’s legacy would have protected you for years if you’d let it’.”

Varl looks up at the Tanith men around the table. “Wasn’t Slaydo the name of the Warmaster?” he asks. “The big honking bastard commander?”

“Yup,” says Feygor.

“Well, this can’t mean the same Slaydo, can it?” asks Costin.

“Of course it can’t,” says Caober. “It must be another Slaydo.”

“Well, of course,” says Varl, “because otherwise it would mean that the feth-wipe commanding us is a more important feth-wipe than we ever imagined.”

“It doesn’t mean that,” says Rawne. “Costin’s right. It’s a different Slaydo, or this Blenner doesn’t know what he’s talking about. Go on. What else is there?”

Varl works down the sheet.

“Blenner finishes by saying that he’s stationed on Hisk with a regiment called the Greygorians. He says he’s got pull with a Lord General called Cybon, and that Cybon’s promised him, that is Gaunt, a staff position. Blenner begs Gaunt to reconsider his ‘ill-advised’ move and get reassigned.”

“That’s it?” asks Rawne.

Varl nods.

“So he’s thinking about ditching us,” murmurs Rawne.

“This letter’s old, mind you,” says Varl.

“But he kept it,” says Feygor. “It matters to him.”

“Murt’s right,” says Rawne. “This means his heart’s not in it. We can exert a little pressure, and get rid of this fether without any of us having to face a firing squad.”

“Having fun?”

They all turn. Dorden is standing nearby, watching them. The boy Milo is behind him, looking pale and nervous. “We’re fine, Doc,” says Feygor. “How are you?”

“Looks for all the world like a meeting of plotters,” says Dorden. He takes a step forwards and comes in amongst them. He’s twice as old as any of them, like their grandfather. He’s no fighter either. Every one of them is a young man, strong enough to break him and kill him with ease. He pours himself a mug of caffeine from their tray.

Costin makes a hasty but abortive attempt to stop him.

“There’s a little—” Costin begins, in alarm.

“Sacra in it?” asks Dorden, sipping. “I should hope so, cold day like this.”

He looks across at Varl.

“What’s that you’ve got, Varl?”

“A letter, Doc.”

“Does it belong to you?”

“Uh, not completely.”

“Did you borrow it?”

“It fell out of someone’s pocket, Doc.”

“Do you think it had better fall back in?” asks Dorden.

“I think that would be a good idea,” says Varl.

“We were just having a conversation, doctor,” says Rawne. “No plots, no conspiracies.”

“I believe you,” Dorden replies. “Just like I believe that no lies would ever, ever come out of your mouth, major.”

“With respect, doctor,” says Rawne, “I’m having a private conversation with some good comrades, and the substance of it is of no consequence to you.”

Dorden nods.

“Of course, major,” he replies. “Just as I’m here to find a plate of food for this boy and minding my own business.”

He turns to talk to the cooks about finding something other than slab in the ration crates.

Then he looks back at Rawne.

“Consider this, though. They say it’s always best to know your enemy. If you succeed in ousting Colonel-Commissar Gaunt, who might you be making room for?”



“WHERE’S THE CHIEF?” Corbec asks, ducking in.

“Frankly, I’ve been too busy to keep tabs on that gigantic fether,” Larkin replies.

“Oh, Larks,” murmurs Corbec over the drumming of infantry weapons, “that lip of yours is going to get you dead before too long unless you curb it. Disrespecting a superior, it’s called.”

Larkin sneers at his old friend.

“Right,” he says. “You’d write me up.”

He is adjusting the replacement barrel of his long-las, hunkered down behind the cyclopean plinth of a heap of rubble that had once been a piece of civic statuary.

“Of course I would,” says Corbec. “I’d have to.”

Corbec has got down on one knee on the other side of a narrow gap between the plinth and a retaining wall that is leaning at a forty-five degree angle. Solid-round fire from the enemy is travelling up the gap between them, channelled by the actual physical shape, like steel pin-balls coursing along a chute. The shots scrape and squeal as they whistle past.

Corbec clacks in a fresh clip and leans out gingerly to snap some discouraging las-rounds back up the gap. “Why?” Larkin asks. “Why would you have to?”

Larkin laughs, mirthlessly. Corbec can almost smell the rank adrenaline sweat coming out of the wiry marksman’s pores. The stress of a combat situation has pushed Larkin towards his own, personal edge, and he is barely in control.

“Because I’m the fething colonel, and I can’t have you bad-mouthing the company commander,” Corbec replies.

“Yeah, but you’re not really, are you?” says Larkin. “I mean, you’re not really my superior, are you?”

“What?”

“Gaunt just picked you and Rawne. It was random. It doesn’t mean anything. There’s no point you carrying on like there’s suddenly any difference between us.”

Corbec gazes across at Larkin, watching him screw the barrel in, nattering away, stray rounds tumbling past them like seed cases in a gale.

“I mean, it’s not like your shit suddenly smells better than mine, is it?” says Larkin. He looks up at last and sees Corbec’s face.

“What?” he asks. “What’s the matter with you?”

Corbec glares at him.

“I am the colonel, Larks,” he snarls. “That’s the point. I’m not your friend anymore. This is either real or there’s no point to it at all.” Larkin just looks at him.

“Oh, for feth’s sake!” says Corbec. “Stop looking at me with those stupid hang-dog eyes! Hold this position. That’s an order, trooper! Mkoll!”

The chief scout comes scurrying over from the other corner of the plinth, head down. He drops in behind Larkin and looks across the gap at Corbec.

“Sergeant Blane’s got the top end of the line firm. I’m going back down that way,” Corbec says, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. “We seem to have lost

Gaunt.”

“It’s tragic,” says Larkin.

“Keep this section in place,” Corbec continues.

Mkoll nods. Corbec sets off.

“What’s got into him?” Larkin mutters.

“Probably something you said,” says Mkoll.

“I don’t say anything we’re not all thinking,” Larkin replies.



OUTSIDE, THE FLAMER makes its sucking roar again.

All four of the Tanith men with Gaunt express their unhappiness in strong terms. Gutes and Domor are cursing.

“We’re done for,” says another of them, a man called Guheen.

“They’ll just torch us out like larisel in a burrow,” says the fourth.

“Maybe—” Gaunt begins.

“No maybe about it!” Gutes spits.

“No, I was trying to say, maybe this gives us a chance we didn’t have before,” Gaunt tells them.

lie ducks down beside Gutes again, and peers out into the mist and rain, craning for a better view. There is still no sign of the flamer, but he can certainly hear it clearly now, retching like some volcanic hog clearing its throat. He can smell promethium smoke too, the soot-black stench of Imperial cleansing.

He looks up at the ominously low ceiling bellying down at them.

“What’s upstairs?” he asks.

“Another floor,” says Guheen.

“Presuming it’s not all crushed in on itself,” adds Domor.

“Yes, presuming it’s not,” Gaunt agrees. “Which of you is the best shot?”

“He is,” Domor says, pointing to the fourth man. Guheen and Gutes both nod assent.

“Mertr, isn’t it?” Gaunt asks. The fourth man nods.

“Mertr, you’re with me. You three, sustained fire pattern here, through these

windows. Just keep it steady.”

Gaunt clammers over the scree of rubble and broken furniture to the back of the chamber. A great deal of debris has poured down what had once been the staircase, blocking it. Wires and cabling hang from ruptured ceiling panels like intestinal loops. Water drips. Broken glass flickers when the lightning scores the sky outside.

Merrt comes up behind Gaunt and touches his arm. He points to the remains of a heat exchanger vent that is crushed into the rear wall of the guild house like a metal plug. They put their shoulders against it and manage to push it out of its setting.

Light shines in. The hole, now more of a slot thanks to the deformation of the building, looks directly out on to rubble at eye level. They hoist themselves up and out, on to the smashed residue of a neighbouring building that has been annihilated, and has flooded its remains down and around the guild house, packing in around its slumped form like a lava flow sweeping an object up.

Gaunt and Merrt pick their way up the slope, and re-enter the guild house through a first-floor window. The floor is sagging and insecure. A few fibres of waterlogged carpet seem to be all that’s holding the joists in place.

“You’re a decent shot, then?” Gaunt murmurs.

“Not bad.”

“Pull this off, I’ll recommend you for a marksman lanyard.” Merrt grins and flashes his eyebrows.

“Should’ve got one anyway,” he says. “The last one went to Larkin. After his psyche evaluation, marksman status was the only special dispensation Corbec could pull to get his old mate a place in the company.”

“Is that true?” Gaunt asks.

“You ought to know. I thought you were in charge?” Gaunt stares at him.

“I’m really looking forward to meeting a Tanith who isn’t insolent or cocksure,” says Gaunt. “Good luck with that,” says Merrt. Gaunt shakes his head.

“I’ve got a smart mouth, I know,” says Merrt. “I said a few things about Larkin getting my lanyard, earned some dark looks from the Munitorum chiefs. My mouth’ll get me in trouble, one day, I reckon.”

“I think you’re already in trouble,” says Gaunt. He gestures out of the window. “I think this qualifies.”

“Feels like it.”

“So you reckon you’re good?”

“Better than Larkin,” says Merrt.

They settle in by the window. The mist shrouding the concourse and the surrounding ruins has grown thicker, as though the discharge of weapons has caused some chemical reaction, and it’s disguising the enemy approach.

Below, about fifteen metres shy of them, they can see the blasts of the approaching flamer, like a sun behind cloud. “Nasty weapon, the flamer,” says Gaunt. “I can well imagine.”

“Then again, it is essentially a can or two of extremely flammable material.”

“You going to be my shot caller?” Merrt asks.

“We have to let it get a little closer,” says Gaunt. “You see where it burps like that?”

Another gout of amber radiance backlights the fog in the square below. Merrt nods, raising the lasrifle to his shoulder.

“Watch which way the glow moves. It’s moving out from the flamer broom.”

“Got it.”

“So the point of origin is going to be behind it, and the tank or tanks another, what, half a metre behind that?”

The flamer roars again. A long, curling rush of fire, like the leaf of a giant fern, emerges from the mist and brushes the front of the guild house. Gaunt hears Domor curse loudly.

“He’s widened the aperture,” Gaunt tells Merrt. “He’s seen buildings ahead, and he’s put a bit of reach on the flame, so he can scour the ruins out.”

Merrt grunts.

“We’ve got to do this if we’re going to,” says Gaunt.

There is another popping cough and then another roar. This time, the curling arc of fire comes up high, like the jet of a pressurised hose.

Gaunt grabs Merrt, and pulls him back as the fire blisters the first-storey windows. It spills in through the window spaces, roasting the frames and sizzling the wet black filth, and plays in across the ceiling like a catch of golden fish, coiling and squirming in a mass, landed on the deck of a boat.

The flames suck out again, leaving the windows scorched around their upper frames and the ceiling blackened above the windows. All the air seems to have gone out of the room. Gaunt and Merrt gasp as if they too have just been landed out of a sea net.

Gaunt recovers the lasrifle and checks it for damage. Merrt picks himself up.

“Come on!” Gaunt hisses.

As Merrt settles into position again, Gaunt peers down into the swirl. “There!

There!” he cries, as the flames jet through the mist and rain again.

Merrt fires. Nothing happens. “Feth!” Merrt whispers.

“When the flame lights up, aim closer to the source,” Gaunt says. The flamer gusts again, ripping fire at the front of the guild house. Merrt fires again.

The tanks go up with a pressurised squeal. A huge doughnut of fire rips through the mist, rolling and coiling, yellow-hot and furious. Several broken metal objects soar into the air on streamers of flame, shrieking like parts of an exploding kettle.

Gaunt raises his head cautiously and looks down. He can see burning figures stumbling around in the fog, PDF troopers caught in the blast. They sizzle loudly in the rain.

“Let’s get out of here,” he says to Merrt.

Gaunt calls to the three Tanith men below, and all five leave the guild house together and work their way back along the edge of the concourse to the advance main force, skirting the open spaces.

“I’ve been looking for you,” says Corbec matter-of-factly when Gaunt appears.

“Not hard enough, I’d say,” Gaunt replies.

Corbec tuts, half entertained.

“You set something off over there?” he asks.

“Just a little parlour trick to keep them occupied while we got out of their way.”

““A little parlour trick’...” Corbec chuckles. “You’re a very amusing man, you know that?”

“Wait till you get to know me,” says Gaunt. Corbec looks at him sadly and says nothing. “What shape are we in, colonel?” Gaunt asks. “Fair,” Corbec replies. “No losses so far?”

“Couple of scratches. But look, their numbers are increasing all the time. Another hour or so, we could start losing friends fast.”

“Can we vox in for support?”

“The vox is still dead as dead,” says Corbec.

“Recommendation?”

“We pull back before the situation becomes untenable. Then we rustle up some proper strength, come back in, finish the job.” Gaunt nods.

“There are problems with that,” he says.

“Do tell.”

“For a start, I’m still not sure who we’re fighting.”

“It’s tribal Archenemy,” says Corbec, “like Mkoll says. They’ve just ransacked the city arsenal.” Gaunt touches his arm and draws him out of earshot. “You never left Tanith before, did you, Corbec?”

“No, sir.”

“Never fought on a foreign front?”

“I’ve been taught about the barbaric nature of the Archenemy, if that’s what you’re worried about. All their cults and their ritual ways—”

“Corbec, you don’t know the half of it.” Corbec looks at him.

“I think they are Kosdorfers,” Gaunt says. “I think they were, anyway. I think the Ruinous Powers, may they stand accursed, have salvaged more than kit and equipment. I think they’ve salvaged men too.”

“Feth,” Corbec breathes. Rain drips off his beard.

“I know,” says Gaunt.

“The very thought of it.”

“I need you to keep that to yourself. Don’t say anything to the men.”

“Of course.”

“None of them, colonel.”

“Yes. Yes, all right.”

Corbec’s taken one of his cigars out again and stuck it in his mouth, unlit.

“Just light the damn thing,” says Gaunt.

Corbec obeys. His hands shake as he strikes the lucifer.

“You want one?”

“No,” says Gaunt.

Corbec puffs.

“All right,” he says. He looks at Gaunt.

“All right,” says Gaunt, “if we give ground here and try to fall back, we leave ourselves open. If they take us out on the way home, they’ll be all over our main force without warning. But if we can manage to keep their attention here while we relay a message back...”

Corbec frowns. “That’s a feth of a lot to ask, by any standards.”

“What, the message run or the action?” asks Gaunt.

“Both,” says Corbec.

“You entirely comfortable with the alternative, Corbec?” Corbec shrugs. “You know I’m not.”

“Then strengthen our position here, colonel,” Gaunt says. “We can afford to drop back a little if necessary. Given the visibility issues, the concourse isn’t helping us much.”

“What do you suggest?” asks Corbec.

“I suggest you ask Mkoll and his scouts. I suggest we make the best of that resource.”

“Yes, sir.”

Corbec turns to go.

“Corbec—another thing. Tell the men to select single shot. Mandatory, please. Full auto is wasting munitions.”

“Yes, sir.”

Corbec stubs out his cigar and moves away. Keeping his head down, Gaunt moves along the shooting line of jumbled pavers and column bases in the opposite direction.

“Trooper!”

Caffran looks up from his firing position. “Yes, sir?”

“It’s your lucky day,” says Gaunt.

He gets down beside Caffran and reaches into his jacket pockets for his stylus and a clean message wafer.

His hip pocket is torn open and flapping. It’s empty. He checks all the pockets of his jacket and the pockets of his storm coat, but his stylus and the wafer pad have gone.

“Do you have the despatch bag, Caffran?”

Caffran nods, and pulls the loop of the small message satchel off over his head. Gaunt opens it, and sees it is in order: fresh message wafers, a stylus, and a couple of signal flares. Caffran has taken his duty seriously.

Gaunt begins writing on one of the wafers rapidly. He uses a gridded sheet to draw up a simple expression of their route and the layout of the city’s south-eastern zone, copying from his waterproof chart. Rain taps on the sheet.

“I need you to take this back to Major Rawne,” he says as he writes.

“Understand that we need to warn him of the enemy presence here and summon his support.”

Gaunt finishes writing and presses the setting of his signet ring against the code seal of the wafer, authorising it.

“Caffran, do you understand?”

Caffran nods. Gaunt puts the wafer back into the message satchel. “Am I to go on my own?” Caffran asks.

“I can’t spare more than one man for this, Caffran,” says Gaunt.

The young man looks at him, considers it. Gaunt is a man who quite bloodlessly orders the death of people to achieve his goals. This is what’s

happening now. Caffran understands that. Caffran understands he is being used as an instrument, and that if he fails and dies, it'll be no more to Gaunt than a shovel breaking in a ditch or a button coming off a shirt. Gaunt has no actual interest in Caffran's life or the manner of its ending.

Caffran purses his lips and then nods again. He hands his lasrifle and the munition spares he was carrying to Gaunt.

“That'll just weigh me down. Somebody else better have them.”

The young trooper gets up, takes a last look at Gaunt, and then begins to pick his way down through the ruined street behind the advance position, keeping his head down.

Gaunt watches him until he's out of sight.



UNDER MKOLL'S INSTRUCTION, the advance gives ground.

Working as spotters out on the flanks, Mkoll's scouts, Bonin and Mkvenner, have pushed the estimate of enemy numbers beyond eight hundred. Gaunt doesn't want to show that he is already regretting his decision not to pull out while the going was good.

Against lengthening, lousy odds, he's committed his small force to the worst kind of combat, the grinding city fight, where mid-range weapons and tactics become compressed into viciously barbaric struggles that depend on reaction time, perception and, worst of all, luck.

The Tanith disengage from the edge of the concourse, which has become entirely clouded in a rising white fog of vapour lifted by the sustained firefight, and drop back into the city block at the south-west corner. Here there are two particularly large habitat structures, which have slumped upon themselves like settling pastry, a long manufactory whose chimneys have toppled like felled trees, and a data library.

The scouts lead them into the warren of ruined halls and broken floors. It is raining inside many of the chambers. Roofs are missing, or water is simply descending through ruptured layers of building fabric. The Tanith melt from

view into the shadows. They cover their cloaks with the black dirt from the concourse, and it helps them to merge with the dripping shadows. Gaunt does as they do. He smears the dirt onto his coat and pulls the cloak on over the top, aware that he is looking less and less like a respectable Imperial officer. Damn it, his storm coat is torn and his jacket is ruined anyway.

They work into the habs. Gunfire cracks and echoes along the forlorn walkways and corridors. Broken water pipes, weeping and foul, protrude from walls and floors like tree stumps. The tiled floor, what little of it survives, is covered with broken glass and pot shards from crockery that has been fragmented by the concussion of war.

Gaunt has kept hold of Caffran's rifle. He's holstered his pistol and got the infantry weapon cinched across his torso, ready to fire. It's a long time since he's seen combat with a rifle in his hands.

Mkoll looms out of the filmy mist that fills the air. He is directing the Tanith forward. He looks at Gaunt and then takes Gaunt's cap off his head.

"Excuse me?" says Gaunt.

Mkoll wipes his index finger along a wall, begrimes it, and then rubs the tip over the silver aquila badge on Gaunt's cap. He hands it back. "It's catching the light," says Mkoll.

"I see. And it's not advisable to wear a target on my head."

"I just don't want you drawing fire down on our unit."

"Of course you don't," says Gaunt.

Every few minutes the gunfire dies away. A period of silence follows as the enemy closes in tighter, listening for movement. The only sound is the downpour. The entire environment is a source of noise: debris and rubble can be dislodged, kicked, disturbed, larger items of wreckage can be knocked over or banged into. Damaged floors groan and creak. Windows and doors protest any attempt to move them. When a weapon is discharged, the echoes set up inside the ruined buildings are a great way of locating the point of origin.

The Tanith are supremely good at this. Gaunt witnesses several occasions when a trooper makes a rattle out of a stone in an old tin cup or pot and sets up a noise to tempt a shot from the demented Kosdorfers. As soon as the shot comes, another Tanith trooper gauges the source of the bouncing echo and returns fire with a lethal volley.

The enemy becomes wise to the tricks, and starts acting more circumspectly. Unable to out-stalk the Tanith, the Kosdorfers begin to call out to them from the darkness.

It is unnerving. The voices are distant and pleading. Little sense can be made of them in terms of meaning, but the tone is clear. It is misery. They are the voices of the damned.

“Ignore them,” Gaunt orders.

They have to stick tight. The enemy has a numerical advantage. By getting out of the open, the Tanith has forced its own spatial advantage. Gaunt wonders if it will be enough.

The ruins still feel like a grave site, a waste of mouldering funereal rot. He wonders if this place will mark the end of his life and soldiering career; a well-thought-of officer who wound up dying in some strategically worthless location because he didn't make the right choices, or shake the right hand, or whisper in the right ear, or dine with the right cliques. He's seen men make high rank that way, through the persuasive power of the officers' club and the staff coterie. They were politicians, politicians who got to execute their decisions in the most literal way. Some were very capable, most were not. Gaunt believes that there is no substitute at all for practical apprenticeship, for field learning to properly supplement the study of military texts and the codices of combat. Slaydo had believed that too, as had Oktar, Gaunt's first mentor.

The vast mechanism of the Imperial Guard, as a rule, did not. Slaydo had once said that he believed he could, through proper reform of the Guard, improve its efficiency by fifty or sixty per cent. Soberly, he had added that mankind was probably too busy fighting wars to ever initiate such reforms.

There is truth in that. Gaunt knows for a fact that Slaydo had a reform bill in mind to take to the Munitorum after the Gorikan Suppression, and again after Khulan. Every time, a new campaign beckoned, a new theatre loomed to occupy the attentions of military planners and commanders. The Sabbat Worlds, now it was the Sabbat Worlds. Slaydo had committed to it mainly, Gaunt knew, for personal reasons. After Khulan, the High Lords had tempted Slaydo with many offers: he'd had the pick of campaigns. He had turned them down, hoping to pursue a more executive office in the latter part of his life and work to the fundamental improvement of the Imperial Guard, which he believed had the capacity to be the finest fighting force in known space.

However, the High Lords had outplayed him. They had discovered his old and passionate fondness for the piety of Saint Sabbat Beati and the territories she had touched, and they had exploited it. The Sabbat Worlds had long since been thought of as unrecoverable, lost to the predations of the Ruinous Powers spreading from the so-called Sanguinary Worlds. No commander wanted to

embrace such a career-destroying challenge. The High Lords wanted a leader who would stage the offensive with conviction. They sweetened the offer with the rank of Warmaster, sensing that Slaydo would be unable to resist the opportunity to liberate a significant territory of the Imperium that he felt had been woefully neglected and left to overrun, and at the same to acquire a status that allowed him much greater political firepower to achieve his reforms.

Instead, Balhaut had killed him. All he accomplished was the commencement of a military campaign that was likely to last generations and cost trillions of lives.

Thus are dreams dashed and good intentions lost. Everything returns to the dust, and everything is reduced to blind fighting in the shadowed ruins of cities against men who were brothers until madness claimed their minds.

Everything returns to the dirt, and the dirt becomes your camouflage, and hides your face and your cap badge in the dark, when death comes, growling, to find you out.



FACED ALONE, OUT of sight of the other men, the ruination of Kosdorf brings tears into his eyes.

Caffran understands the urgency of his mission, but he's also smart enough not to run. Headlong running, as the chief scout has pointed out so often, just propels a man into the open, into open spaces he hasn't checked first, across hidden objects that might be pressure-sensitive, through invisible wires, into the line of predatory gunsights.

Caffran is fit, as physically fit as any of the younger men who've been salvaged from Tanith. That's one of the reasons he's been selected as a courier.

The advance came into the grave city as a unit, testing its way and proceeding with recon. Now he's exiting alone, a solitary trooper, protected by his wits and training. There's no doubt in his mind that the enemy will have spread strengths out through the dead boroughs surrounding the fighting zone to catch any stragglers.

Kosdorf reminds him of Tanith Magna. Architecturally, it's nothing like it, of course. Tanith Magna was a smaller burg, high-walled, a gathering of predominantly dark stone towers and spires rising from the emerald canopy of Tanith like a monolith. It had nothing of Kosdorf's dank, white, mausoleum quality. It's simply the mortality of Kosdorf that has stabbed him in the heart. Caffran knows that Tanith Magna doesn't even persist as a ruin anymore, but Voltemand's second city, in death, inevitably makes him think of it, and the ruins become a substitute for his loss.

More than once, he feels quite sure he knows a street, or a particular corner. Memories superimpose themselves over alien habs and thoroughfares, and nostalgia, fletched with unbearable melancholy, spears him. He thinks he recognises one flattened frontage as the public house where he used to meet his friends, another shell as the mill shop where he had been apprenticed, and a broken walkway as the narrow street that had always taken him to the diocese temple. A patch of burned wasteland and twisted wire is most certainly the street market where he sometimes bought vegetables and meat for his ageing mother.

This terrace, this terrace with its cracked and broken flagstones, is definitely the square beside the Elector's Gardens, where he used to meet Laria. He can smell nalwood... He can smell wet ash. Lightning jags silently.

He wipes a knuckle across his cheekbone, knowing that humiliating tears are mixing with the rain on his face.

He takes a deep breath. He isn't concentrating. He isn't paying enough attention. He stops to get his bearings, trusting the innate wiring of the Tanith mind to sense direction.

If the God-Emperor, who Caffran dutifully worshipped all his life at the little diocese temple, has seen fit to take everything away from him except this single duty, then Caffran is fething well determined to do it properly. He... He feels the hairs prick up on the back of his neck.

The las-shot misses his face by about a palm's length. Just the slightest tremor of a trigger finger was the difference between a miss and a solid headshot. The light and noise of it rock him, the heat sears him, flash-drying the dirty tears and rain on his cheek into a crust.

Caffran throws himself down, and rolls into cover. He scrabbles in behind the foundation stones of a levelled building. Two more rounds pass over him, and then a hard round hits the block to his left. Caffran hears the distinctly different sound quality of the impact.

He thanks the God-Emperor with a nod. The enemy has just provided

information. A minimum of two shooters, not one.

Caffran gets lower still. With his face almost pressing into the ooze, he repositions himself, and risks a look around the stone blocks.

Another shot whines past him, but it is speculative. The shooter hasn't seen him. A filthy PDFer is hopping across the rubble towards his position, clutching an old autorifle. He looks like a hobbled beggar. The puttee around one of his calves is loose and trailing, and his breeches are torn. His face is concealed by an old gas mask. The air pipe swings like a proboscis, unattached to any air tank. One of the glass eye discs is missing.

Behind him, a distance back, a second PDFer stands on the top of a sloping section of roof that is lying across a street. He has a lascarbine raised to his shoulder and sighted. As the PDFer in the gas mask approaches, the other one clips off in Caffran's general direction.

Caffran draws his only weapon, the long Tanith knife.

He stays low, hearing the crunch of the approaching enemy trooper. He can smell him too, a stench like putrefaction.

Another las-shot sings overhead. Caffran tries to slow his breathing. The footsteps get closer. He can hear the man's breath rasping inside the mask.

Caffran turns the knife around in his hand until he is holding the blade, and then very gently taps the pommel against the stone block, using the knife like a drum stick.

Chink! Chink! Chink!

He hears the enemy trooper's respiration rate change, his breath sounds alter as he turns to face a different direction. His footsteps clatter loose stone chips and crunch slime. He is right there. He is coming around the other side of the stone block.

The moment he appears, Caffran goes for him. He tries to make full body contact so he can bring the man over before he can aim his rifle. Caffran tries to force the muzzle of the rifle in under one of his arms rather than point it against his torso.

Locked together, they tumble down behind the block. The autorifle discharges.

From his vantage on the fallen roof slope, the other trooper hesitates, watching. He lowers his lasrifle, then raises it to sight again.

A shape pops back into view over the stone slab, a filthy shape, with a grimed gas-masked face. The watching trooper hesitates from firing.

The figure with the gas mask brings up an autorifle in a clean, fluid swing and fires a burst that hits the hesitating PDFer in the throat and chest, and tumbles

him down the roof slope, scattering tiles.

Caffran drops the autorifle and wrenches off the gas mask as he falls to his knees. He gags and then vomits violently. The stench inside the borrowed mask, the residue, has been foul, even worse than he could have imagined. The mask's previous owner lies on his back beside him, beads of bright red blood spattering his mud-caked chest. Caffran slides the warknife out and wipes the blade.

Then he throws up again.

He can hear activity in the ruins behind him. It's time to move. He stares at the autorifle, and tries to weigh up the encumbrance against the usefulness of a ranged weapon. He reaches over and searches the large canvas musette pouches his would-be killer has strapped to the front of his webbing. One is full of odd junk: meaningless pieces of stone and brick, shards of pottery and glass, a pair of broken spectacles and a tin of boot polish. The other holds three spare clips for the rifle, and a battered old short-pattern autopistol, a poor quality, mass-stamped weapon with limited range.

It will have to do. He puts it into his pocket.

It's really time to move.



IT'S GETTING DARK. Night doesn't drop like a lid on Voltemand like it did on Tanith. It fills the sky up slowly, billowing like ink in water.

The rain's still hammering the Imperial camp, but the dark rim of the sky makes the silent lightning more pronounced. The white spears are firing every twenty or thirty seconds, like an automatic beacon set to alarm.

The boy's asleep, legs and arms loosely arranged like a dog flopped by a grate. Dorden hates to abuse his medicae privileges, but he believes that the God-Emperor of Mankind will forgive him for crushing up a few capsules of tranquiliser and mixing them into the boy's broth. He'll do penance if he has to. They had plenty of temple chapels back in the city, and a popular local saint, a woman. She looked like the forgiving sort.

The boy's on a cot at the end of the ward. Dorden brews a leaf infusion over

the small burner and turns the page of his book, open on the instrument rest. It's a work called *The Spheres of Longing*. He's yet to meet another man in the Imperial Guard who's ever heard of it, let alone read it. He doubts he will. The Imperial Guard is not a sophisticated institution.

Nearby, Lesp is cleaning his needles in a pot of water. He's done two or three family marks tonight at the end of his shift, a busy set. His eyes are tired, but he keeps going long enough to make sure the needles are sterile for the next job. Lesp is always eager to work. It's as if he's anxious to get down all the Tanith marks before he forgets them. Dorden sometimes wonders where Lesp will ink his marks when he runs out of Tanith skin to make them on.

The boy kicks as a dream trembles through him. Dorden watches him to make sure he's all right.

The doorway flap of the tent opens and Rawne steps in out of the lengthening light and the rain. Drops of it hang in his hair and on his cloak like diamonds. Dorden gets to his feet. Lesp gathers his things and makes himself scarce.

"Major."

"Doctor."

"Can I help you?"

"Just doing the rounds. Is everything as it should be here?" Dorden nods.

"Nothing untoward."

"Good," says Rawne.

"It's getting dark," Dorden says, as Rawne moves to leave.

"It is."

"Doesn't that mean the advance unit is overdue?"

Rawne shrugs. "A little."

"Doesn't that concern you?" asks Dorden.

Rawne smiles.

"No," he says.

"At what point will it concern you?" Dorden asks.

"When it's actually dark and they're officially missing."

"That could be hours yet. And at that point it will be too late to mobilise any kind of force to go looking for them," says Dorden.

"Well, we'd absolutely have to wait for morning at least," says Rawne. Dorden looks at him, and rubs his hand across his face.

"What do you think's happened to them?" he asks.

"I can't imagine," says Rawne.

"What do you hope's happened to them?" Dorden asks.

“You know what I hope,” says Rawne. He’s smiling still, but it’s just teeth. There’s no warmth. It’s like lightning without thunder. Dorden sips his drink.

“I’d ask you to consider,” he says, “the effect it would have on the Tanith Regiment if it lost both of its senior commanding officers.”

“Please, Doctor,” says Rawne, “this isn’t an emergency. It’s just a thing. They’ve probably just got held up somewhere.”

“And if not?”

Rawne shrugged.

“It’ll be a terrible loss, like you said. But we’d just have to get over it. We’ve had practice at that, haven’t we?”



THE EMACIATED GHOSTS of Kosdorf come at them through the skeletal ruins. They have become desperate. Their need, their hunger has overwhelmed their caution. They loom through useless doors and peer through empty windows. They clamber out of sour drains and emerge from cover behind spills of rubble. They fire their weapons and call out in pleading, raw voices.

The rain has thickened the dying light. Muzzle flashes flutter dark orange, like old flame.

The Tanith knot tight, and fend them off with precision. They fall back through the manufactory into the data library.

It’s there they lose their first life. A Tanith infantryman is caught by autogun fire. He staggers suddenly, as if winded. Then he simply goes limp and falls. His hands don’t even come up to break his impact against the tiled floor. Men rush to him, and drag him into cover, but Gaunt knows he’s gone by the way his heels are kicking out. Blood soaks the man’s tunic, and smears the floor in a great curl like black glass when they drag him. First blood.

Gaunt doesn’t know the dead man’s name. It’s one of the names he hasn’t learned yet. He hates himself for realising, just for a second, that it’s one less he’ll have to bother with.

Gaunt keeps the nalwood stock of Caffran’s lasrifle tight against his shoulder

and looses single shots. The temptation to switch to auto is almost unbearable.

The lobby of the data library is a big space, which once had a glass roof, now fallen in. Rain pours in, every single moving drop of it catching the light. Kosdorfer ghosts get up on the lobby's gallery, and angle fire down at the Tanith below. The top of the desk once used by the venerable clerk of records stipples and splinters, and the row of ornate brass kiosks where scholars and gnostics once filled out their data requests dent and quiver. Floor tiles crack. The delicate etched metal facings of the wall pit and dimple.

Corbec looks out at Gaunt from behind a chipped marble column.

"This won't do," he shouts.

Gaunt nods back.

"Support!" Corbec yells.

They've been sparing with their heavy weapon all day. They're only a light advance team, and they weren't packing much to begin with.

The big man comes up level with Corbec, head down. He's carrying the lascarbine he's been fighting with, but he's got a long canvas sleeve across his back. He unclasps it to slide out the rocket tube.

The big man's name is Bragg. He really is big. He's not much taller than Corbec, but he's got breadth across the shoulders. There's a younger Tanith with him, one of the kids, a boy called Beltayn. He's carrying the leather box with the eight anti-tank rockets in it, and he gets one out while Bragg snaps up the tube's mechanical range-finder.

"Any time you like, Try!" Larkin yells out from behind an archway that is becoming riddled with shots.

"Shut your noise," Bragg replies genially. He glances at Gaunt abruptly.

"Sorry, colonel-commissar, sir!" he says.

"Get on with it, please!" Gaunt shouts. It's not so much the heavy fire they're taking, it's the voices. It's probably his imagination, but the pleading, moaning voices of the Kosdorfers calling out to them are starting to make sense to him.

Beltayn goes to offer up the rocket to Bragg's launcher, and a las-bolt fells him. Gaunt's eyes widen as the rocket tumbles out of the hands of the falling boy and drops towards the tiled floor.

It hits, bounces, a tail-fin dents slightly. It doesn't detonate.

Gaunt dashes forward. Corbec has reached Bragg too. Bragg has picked up the rocket. He taps it cheerfully against his head. "No fear," he says. "Arming pin's still in."

Gaunt snatches the rocket, and stoops to the box to swap it for an undamaged

one. "See to the boy!" he says to Corbec.

"Just a flesh wound!" Corbec replies, hunched over Beltayn. "Just his arm."

"Get him back to the archway!"

"I can't leave—"

"Get his arse back to the archway, colonel! I'll do this!"

"Yes sir!"

Corbec starts dragging the boy back towards the main archway. Men come out of cover to help him. Gaunt gets a clean rocket out of the box. He rolls it in his hands to check it by eye. It's been a long time since he loaded, a long time since he learned basic skills. A long time since he was the boy, the Hyrkan boy, apprenticed to war, born into it as if it was a family business.

"Set?" he asks the big man.

"Yes, sir!" says Bragg.

Gaunt fits the rocket and removes the arming pin. Bragg hoists the top-heavy tube onto the shelf of his shoulder and takes aim at the lobby gallery. Gaunt slaps him twice on the shoulder.

"Ease!" he yells.

"Ease!" Bragg yells back. The word opens the mouth and stops the eardrums bursting.

Bragg pulls the bare metal trigger. The ignition thumps the air, and blow-back spits from the back of the tube and throws up dust. The rocket howls off in the other direction, on a trail of flame. It hits the gallery just under the rail, and detonates volcanically. The entire gallery lifts for a second, and then comes down like an avalanche, spilling rubble, stonework, grit, glass and men. It collapses with a drawn-out roar, a death rattle of noise and disintegration.

Gaunt looks at Bragg. Bragg grins. Their ears are ringing.

Gaunt signals back to the archway.

They run in through the archway, through the smoke blowing from the lobby. They get down. Corbec has signalled a pause while they wait to hear how the enemy redeploys.

It gets quieter. The building settles. Rubble clatters as it falls now and then. Glass tinkles. Gaunt sinks down next to Bragg, his back to a wall. "First time that time," says Larkin from a corner nearby. "I know," says Bragg. He looks at Gaunt. He's proud of himself. "Sometimes I miss," he explains.

"I know," says Gaunt. The big man's nickname is Try Again because he's always messing up the first shot.

Gaunt sits quiet for a minute or two. He wipes the sweat off his face. I le

thinks about trying again, and second chances. Sometimes there just isn't the opportunity or the willingness to make things better. Sometimes you can't simply have another go. You make a choice, and it's a bad one, and you're left with it. No amount of trying again will fix it. Don't expect anyone to feel sorry for you, to cut you slack; you made a mistake you'll have to live with.

It was like failing to play the glittering game when he had the chance as one of Slaydo's brightest; like leaving the Hyrkans; like trying to salvage anything from the Tanith disaster; like thinking he could win broken, grieving men over; like coming out with a small advance force into a city grave, just because he was bored of sitting in his tent.

He takes his cap off, leans the crown of his head back against the damp wall and closes his eyes. He opens them again. It's dark above him, the roofspace of the library. Beads of rainwater and flakes of plaster are dripping and splattering down towards him, catching the intermittent lightning, like snow, like the slow traffic of stars through the aching loneliness of space.

He remembers something, one little thing. He puts his hand in his pocket, just to touch the letter, just to put his fingers on the letter his old friend Blenner sent him: Blenner, his friend from Schola Progenium, manufacturer of fake plastic explosives and practical jokes.

Blenner, manufacturer of empty promises, too, no doubt. The letter's old. The offer may not still stand, if it ever did. Vaynom Blenner was not the most reliable man, and his mouth had a habit of making offers the rest of him couldn't keep.

But it's a small hope, a sustaining thing, the possibility of trying again.

The letter is gone.

Suddenly alert, torn from his reverie, Gaunt begins to search his pockets. It's really gone. The pocket he thought he'd put it in is hanging off, thanks to the thrust of a rusty sword bayonet. All the pockets of his field jacket and storm coat are empty.

The letter's lost. It's outside somewhere in this grave of a city, disintegrating in the rain.

"What's the matter?" asks Bragg, noticing Gaunt's activity. "Nothing," says Gaunt. "You sure?" Gaunt nods.

"Good," says Bragg, sitting back again. "I thought you might have the torments on you."

"The torments?"

"Everyone gets them," says Bragg. "Everyone has their own. Bad dreams. Bad memories. Most of us, it's about where we come from. Tanith, you know."

“I know,” says Gaunt.

“We miss it,” says Bragg, like this idea might, somehow, not be clear to anyone. “It’s hard to bear. It’s hard to think about what happened to it, sometimes. It gets us inside. You know Gutes?”

Bragg points across at Piet Gutes, one of the men who was in the guild house with Domor. Like all the Tanith, Gutes is resting for a moment, sitting against a wall, feet pulled in, gun across his knees, listening.

“Yeah,” says Gaunt.

“Friend of mine,” says Bragg. “He had a daughter called Finra, and she had a daughter called Foona. Feth, but he misses them. Not being away from them, you understand. Just them not being there to return to. And Mkendrick?”

Bragg points to another infantryman. His voice is low. “He left a brother in Tanith Steeple. I think he had family in Attica too, an uncle—”

“Why are you telling me this, trooper?” Gaunt asks. “I know what happened. I know what I did. Do you want me to suffer? I can’t make amends. I can’t do that.”

Bragg frowns.

“I thought,” he starts to say.

“What?” asks Gaunt.

“I thought that’s what you were trying to do,” says Bragg. “With us. I thought you were trying to make something good out of what was left of Tanith.”

“With respect, trooper, you’re the only man in the regiment who thinks that. Also, with respect to the fighting merits of the Tanith, I’m an Imperial Guard commander, not a miracle worker. I’ve got a few men, a handful in the great scheme of things. We’re never going to accomplish much. We’re going to be a line of code in the middle of a Munitorum levy report, if that.”

“Oh, you never know,” says Bragg. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter if we don’t. All that matters is you do right by the men.”

“I do right by them?”

“That’s all we want,” says Bragg with a smile. “We’re Tanith. We’re used to knowing where we’re going. We’re used to finding our way. We’re lost now. All we want from you is for you to find a path for us and set us on it.”

Someone nearby says something. Corbec holds up a hand, makes a gesture. Pattering rain. Otherwise, silence. Everyone’s listening. Gaunt pats the big man on the arm and goes over to join Corbec. “What is it?” he asks.

“Beltayn says he heard something,” Corbec replies. The boy is settled in beside Corbec, the wounded arm packed and taped. He looks at Gaunt.

He says, "Something's awry."

"What's that supposed to mean?" asks Gaunt.

Corbec indicates he should listen. Gaunt cranes his neck.

The Kosdorfers are moving. They're talking again. Their whispers are breathing out of the ruins to reach the Tanith position.

Gaunt looks sharply at Corbec.

"I think I can understand the words," he says.

"Me too," Corbec nods.

Gaunt swallows hard. He's got a sick feeling, and he's not sure where it's coming from. The feeling is telling him that he's not suddenly comprehending the Kosdorfers because they are speaking Low Gothic.

He's understanding them because he's learned their language.



THE BOY WAKES up with a start.

"Go back to sleep," Dorden tells him. "You need your sleep."

Dorden's standing in the doorway of the tent, watching the evening coming in.

Milo gets up.

"Are they back yet?" he asks. Dorden shakes his head.

"Someone needs to go and look for them," the boy says flatly. "I had another dream. A really unpleasant one. Someone needs to go and look for them."

"Just go back to sleep," Dorden insists. The boy slumps a little, and turns back to his cot.

"You dreamed they were in trouble, did you?" Dorden asks, trying to humour the boy.

"No," replies the boy, sitting down on the cot and looking back at the medicae. "That's not why I have the feeling they're in trouble. I didn't dream it, that's just common sense. They're overdue. My bad dream, it was just a dream about numbers. Like last night and the night before."

"Numbers?" asks Dorden.

Milo nods. "Just some numbers. In my dream, I'm trying to write these

numbers down, over and over, but my stylus won't work, and for some reason that's not a pleasant dream to have."

Dorden looks at the boy. He asks, "So what are the numbers, Brin?", still humouring him.

The boy reels the numbers off.

"When did he tell you that?" Dorden asks.

"Who?"

"Gaunt."

"He didn't tell me anything," says the boy. "He certainly didn't tell me those numbers. I just told you, they were in my dream. I dreamed about them."

"Are you lying to me, Brin?"

"No, sir."

Dorden keeps staring at the boy a minute more, as if a lie will suddenly give itself away, like the moon coming out from behind a cloud. "Why do those numbers matter?" the boy asks. "They're Gaunt's command code," says Dorden.



"EXPLAIN YOURSELF," THE voice demands. It comes out like an echo, from the ruins, the ghost of a voice. "Explain yourself. We don't understand why."

The voice tunes in and out, like a vox that's getting interference. "We're hungry," it adds.

Corbec looks at Gaunt. He wants to reply, Gaunt can see it on his face. Gaunt shakes his head.

"You left us here," the voice says. It's two or three voices now, all speaking at once, like two or three vox sets tuned to the same signal, their speakers slightly out of sync. "Why did you leave us here? We don't understand why you left us behind."

"Feth's sake is that?" Corbec mutters to Gaunt. All good humour has gone from him. He's looking pinched and scared.

"You left us behind, and we're hungry," the voices plead.

"I don't know," says Gaunt. "A trick."

He says it, but he doesn't believe it. It's an uglier thing than that. The voices don't really sound like voices when you listen hard, or vox transmits either. They sound like... like other noises that have been carefully mixed up and glued together to make voice sounds. All the noises of the dead city have been harvested: the scatter of pebbles, the slump of masonry, the splinter and smash of glass, the creak of rebar, the crack of tiles, the spatter of rain. All those things and millions more besides, blended into a sound mosaic that almost perfectly imitates the sound of human speech.

Almost, but not quite.

Almost human, but not human enough.

"You left us behind, and we're hungry. Explain yourself. We don't understand why you left us. We don't understand why you didn't come."

The Tanith are all up, all disturbed. Knuckles are white where hands grip weapons. Everyone's soaking wet. Everyone's watching the dripping shadows. Gaunt needs them to keep it together. He knows they can all hear it. The inhuman imperfection in the voices.

"I know what that is," says Larkin.

"Steady, Larks," growls Corbec.

"I know what that is. I know, I know what that is," the marksman says. "I know it. It's Tanith."

"Shut up, Larks."

"It's Tanith. It's dead Tanith calling to us! It's Tanith calling to us, calling us back!"

"Shut up please, Larks!"

"Larkin, shut your mouth!" Gaunt barks.

Larkin makes a sound, a mewling sob. Fear's inside him, deep as a bayonet.

The voices are out there in the dark and the rain. The words seem to move from one speaker to the next. Dead speakers. Broken throats.

"We don't understand why you didn't come. We don't understand. We don't know who we are anymore. We don't know where we belong."

Gaunt looks at Corbec.

"We getting out?" he asks.

"Through the back way?"

"Whatever way we can find."

"What happened to holding this place until reinforcements arrive?" asks Corbec.

"No one's coming this way that we want to meet," says Gaunt. Corbec turns to

the advance force. “Get ready to move,” he orders.

The voice pleads, “Where do we belong? We don’t know where we belong.”

“It’s Tanith!” Larkin cries out. “It’s the old place calling out to us!” Gaunt grabs him, and pushes him against a wall.

“Listen to me,” he says. “Larkin? Larkin? Listen to me! Get yourself under control! Something worse than death happened here, something much worse!”

“What?” Larkin whines, wanting to know and not wanting to know.

“Something Tanith was spared, do you understand me?”

Larkin makes the sobbing sound again. Gaunt lets him go, lets him sag against the wall. He turns, and the men are all around him. Mkoll’s right there, Mkvenner too, looking as if they’re going to step in and pull Gaunt and Larkin apart. The Tanith men are all staring at him. No one’s looking away.

“Do you understand?” Gaunt asks them. “All of you? Any of you?”

“We understand what you did,” one of them says.

“Oh, this isn’t helping anything, lads!” Corbec rumbles.

Gaunt ignores Corbec and laughs a brutal laugh. “I’m a destroyer of worlds, am I? You credit me with too much power. Indecent amounts of it. And anyway, I don’t much care what you think of me.”

“Let’s go! Let’s go now,” says Corbec.

“There’s only one thing I want you to understand,” Gaunt says. “What’s that?” asks Larkin, his mouth trembling. “The worst thing you can imagine,” says Gaunt, “is not the worst thing. Not by a long way.”



IN THE OPEN, the rain is heavy, like a curtain. Caffran knows he’s never going to make it. The straggly figures hunting him are closing in, and they’ve been calling to him for the last ten minutes, using the voices of people he used to know, twisted by bad vox reception.

“We don’t know why you left us,” the voices plead. “Where do we belong? We don’t know where we belong.”

Caffran’s feet are sore. He’s got the pistol in his hand. Its clip is empty. He’s

killed three more men on his way out of the ruins.

The voices call out, “We’ve forgotten what we’re supposed to be.”

He’s reached the ramparts of the hills, with the city grave at his back. He kneels down. The Imperial camp is somewhere ahead, below and far away. He can’t see it, because rain and night shadows are filling the valley, but he knows it must be there. Too far, too far.

There are signal flares in his message satchel. He’s pulling them out as the heavy raindrops bounce off his shoulders and his scalp. Does he need to find higher ground? There’ll be obs positions looking this way, won’t there? Spotters and look-outs?

The voices call to him.

He stands and fires a flare. It makes a hollow bang and soars up into the wet air, a white phosphor star with a gauzy tail, like a drawing of a comet in an old manuscript. It maxes altitude, and then starts to descend, slow, trembling, drifting.

Caffran’s watching it, the other flare in his hand ready to fire. He knows there’s no point.

The flare looks too much like the silent lightning.

There are figures on the hillside around him. They come towards him.

They call out to him.



BONIN LOCATES THE remains of a depository entrance in the south-western corner of the data library, and they exit, via the basement stacks. They make their break out from there.

The basement is flooded, up to their hips. They have to cannibalise an RPG shell to make a charge to blow the hatch open. Then they’re out into the street, into the rain, and they’re drawing heavy fire right from the start.

Gaunt orders bounding cover, and they push along a street from position to position. They stay in good formation, despite the level of fire coming at them. No one switches back to full auto, despite the temptation.

Even so, the advance is pushing the limits of the ammo supplies it's packing.

They begin to string out into a longer and longer line. They make it to the circus where two dead boulevards cross, and pick their way through the underwalks of the crippled tramway shelters to achieve the far side. Volleys of shots rain off the crumpled metal roofs of the shelters. The objective is the arterial route that joins the eastern boulevard. Gaunt and Corbec tell Blane to push ahead and edge back to bring the rear of the line up.

The advance is halfway across the circus when it's rushed by enemy ambushers. The ambushers come out of one of the underwalks that looked like it was choked with rubble. They're armed like trench raiders with clubs and mauls and butcher hooks. They hit the Tanith advance in the midsection of its bounding spread. They rush Gaunt as he's trying to direct the force forwards.

Gaunt goes down and his head strikes something. He's too stunned to know what's happened. A raider swings a hook to split his head and finish him.

Mkoll intercepts the raider, and guts him with his silver warknife. He meets the next one head-on, somehow evades a wide swing from a spiked mace, and rams the knife up through the throat so the point exits the apex of the skull.

Corbec's also been caught in the initial rush. He takes his attacker over with him, and breaks his neck using body weight and a wrestling hold he'd learned watching his old dad compete at the County Pryze fair.

He looks up in time to see Mkoll pull the knife out. Blood ribbons up in a semicircle, like a red streamer in the rain, and the raider curves backwards in the opposite direction. Through the sheeting rain, Corbec can see more raiders coming out of the underwalk at Mkoll. Corbec's lasrifle is wedged under the corpse of the man he just killed. He yells Mkoll's name. He yells idiot and feth too, for good measure. Mkoll's las is strapped over his shoulder. He's facing three men with just his knife.

There's the whine of a small but powerful fusion motor, the unmistakable whir of a chainsword firing up. Gaunt comes in beside the scout. Gaunt's got blood down the side of his face and his cap's gone missing. The three raiders are too close to Mkoll for Gaunt to risk a shot with his rifle or his bolter.

He takes a head clean off with his chainsword. The neck parts in a bloodmist venting from the blade's moving edge. Corbec can see from Gaunt's stance and the way he presents that he's been trained in sword work to the highest degree. Covered in dust and blood, on a slope of rubble, fighting feral ghouls, he still looks like a duelling master.

Gaunt lunges and puts the chainsword through the torso of a second raider,

freeing Mkoll enough to tackle the last of the group in quick order. More are running in from the underwalk. Gaunt rotates, extending, and slices the chainsword around in a wide, straight-armed arc that neatly removes the top of a skull like a lid.

Corbec's on his feet. He pulls his lasrifile in against his gut and flips the toggle over. Then he rakes the mouth of the underwalk. Full auto flash lights up the rubble. Figures twist and jerk. He exhausts a power clip, and then lobs his last grenade down the underwalk to take care of any stragglers.

Gaunt looks around for his cap.

"Why didn't you do that?" he asks Mkoll.

"You wanted to conserve ammo," says Mkoll.

"In all fairness, he probably could have taken them all with his knife," says Corbec.

From up ahead, towards the east boulevard, they hear lasrifles starting to cut loose on full auto. The chatter is unmistakable. "Ah. I've set a bad example," says Corbec.



GAUNT MOVES FORWARD, shouting orders. He heads towards the front of the advance force, trying to restore firing discipline. Right away, he realises how badly broken their formation is. The ambush to the midsection of the spread has almost cut the advance in two. It's the beginning of the end. The enemy is exploiting their flaws, breaking them down, cutting them into manageable parts, reducing them. He knows the signs. It's exactly what he'd do. It'll be over in minutes.

The back of the party is lagging too far behind. Gaunt tries to get the forward section to drop back and rejoin it, or at least hold position and not extend the break. It's still pushing ahead to try to reach the arterial route. Corbec's hollering at men, calling them by their first names, names Gaunt's never heard, let alone learned. Full auto fire is clattering away up ahead. Some PDFers loom over the rubble line, and Gaunt drops them with support fire from Domor and Guheen.

“Single shots! Single shot fire!” he’s yelling.

He sees the Tanith fanning towards him, firing on full auto. At least one of his orders has got through, he thinks. At least they’ve swung back to keep the unit whole.

Then he’s eyes-on, properly. These Tanith aren’t members of the advance.

Rawne rakes a couple of bursts into the rubble line, and then approaches Gaunt as reinforcements pour in behind him. “Major?”

“Sir.”

“Surprised to see you.”

“We ran into Caffran,” Rawne says.

“You ran into him?”

“We saw his flare. He was heading home, but we were already on our way out.”

“Why is that, major?” Gaunt asks.

“Concern was expressed to me by the medical chief that the advance was overdue. A support mission seemed prudent, before it got dark and out of the question.”

“It’s appreciated, Rawne. As you can see, things are a little lively.”

Rawne keeps looking at his timepiece.

“Let’s keep falling back apace,” he says. “Let’s not outstay our welcome.” Gaunt nods. “Lead the way.”

Rawne turns and yells out to the men running his flanking units. Varl and Feygor get their fireteams to interlock firing patterns. They lay down a kill zone of las-fire that moves with the Tanith like a shadow. It burns through ammo, but it covers the retreat off the east boulevard and onto the main arterial route. They leave spent munition clips behind them, and the pathetic corpses of the enemy.

Adare and Meryn distribute ammo to Blane and the forward portion of the advance. Gaunt sees Caffran with Varl’s squad. He tosses his rifle and his musette bag back to him. Caffran catches them and nods.

Rawne’s still glancing at his timepiece.

“Let’s go! Let’s go!” he shouts. It’s really getting dark. The fluttering, stammering barrage of the gun battle is lighting up the whole city block.

“We’re going as fast as we can,” Gaunt says to Rawne.

Rawne looks at him, and sucks in a breath between clenched teeth that suggests that there’s no such thing as too fast.

Gaunt hears a noise, a swift, loud, rushing hiss, the sound of a descent, of a plunge, of an angelic fall from grace. It ends in a noise shock that quakes the

ground and nearly knocks him down. It feels like the lightning has found its voice at last.

Then it happens again and again.

Light blinds them. Bright detonations rip through the eastern boroughs of Kosdorf, some as close as a block or two away from their position. Blast overlaps blast, detonation touches detonation. It's precision wrath. It's bespoke annihilation.

"The Ketzok," yells Rawne to Gaunt. "A little early," he admits.

Gaunt watches the heavy shelling for a moment, hand half-shielding his eyes from the flash. Then he turns the Tanith out of the zone with a simple hand signal.

It's too loud for voices anymore.



DORDEN CLEANS HIS head wound.

"It's going to mend nicely," he says, dropping the small forceps into an instrument bath. Threads of blood billow through the cleaning solution like ink in water.

Gaunt picks up a steel bowl and uses it as a mirror to examine the sutures.

"That's neat work," he says. Dorden shrugs.

Outside, in the morning light, the Ketzok artillery is still pounding relentlessly, like the slow, steady movement of a giant clock. Munitions resupply is an hour away, the bombardiers report. A huge pall of smoke is moving north across the sky over the hills.

"Rawne says you were instrumental in urging him to mount a reinforcement," Gaunt says.

Dorden smiles.

"I'm sure Major Rawne was simply following standard operational practices," he says.

Gaunt leaves the medicae tent. There's still rain in the air, though now it's spiced with the stink of fyceline from the sustained bombardment. The camp is

active. They'll be striking soon. Directives have come through, order bags from command. The Tanith are being routed to another front line.

He's got things to think about. A week spent getting the regiment embarked and on the lift ships will give him time.

"Sir."

He turns, and sees Corbec. "Caligula, I hear," says Corbec.

"That's the next stop," Gaunt agrees. They fall into step.

"I don't know much about Caligula," says Corbec.

"Then request a briefing summary from the Munitorum, Corbec," says Gaunt. "We have libraries of data about the Sabbat Worlds. It would pay the regiment dividends if the officers knew a little bit about the local conditions before they arrived in a fighting area."

"I can do that, can I?" asks Corbec.

"You're a regimental colonel," says Gaunt. "Of course you can."

Corbec nods.

"I'll get on it," he says.

He grins, flops back his camo-cape, and produces one of his cigars and a couple of lucifers from his breast pocket.

"Thought you might enjoy this now we're outside field discipline conditions," he says.

Gaunt takes the gift with a nod. Corbec knocks him a little salute and walks away.

Gaunt goes into his quarters tent to spend an hour packing his kit. The rain is tapping on the roof skin.

His spare field jacket is hanging on the back of the folding chair. Someone's sponged it clean and brushed up the nap. They've taken off the Hyrkan badges and sewn Tanith ones on in their place.

There is no clue at all as to who has done this.

Gaunt takes off the muddy coat and jacket he's been wearing all night and slips the spare on, not even sure it's his. He strokes it down, adjusts the cuffs and puts his hands in the pockets.

The letter's in the right-hand hip pocket.

He slides it out and unfolds it. He'd been so certain it was in his number one field jacket. So certain.

He reads it, and re-reads it, and smiles, hearing the words in Blenner's voice.

Then he strikes one of the lucifers Corbec gave him, and holds the letter by the lower left-hand corner as he lights the lower right. It burns quickly, with a

yellow flame. He holds on to it until the flames approach his fingertips, and then shakes it into the ash box beside his desk.

Then he goes out to find some breakfast.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Abnett is a novelist and award-winning comic book writer. He has written over thirty-five novels, including the acclaimed Gaunt's Ghosts series, the Eisenhorn and Ravenor trilogies and, with Mike Lee, the Darkblade cycle. His novels Horus Rising and Legion (both for the Black Library) and his Torchwood novel Border Princes (for the BBC) were all bestsellers. His novel Triumff, for Angry Robot, was published in 2009 and nominated for the British Fantasy Society Award for Best Novel. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent. Dan's blog and website can be found at [www.danabnett.com](http://www.danabnett.com)

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